

**THE INNER CONNECTION
BETWEEN POLITICS AND MORALITY:
HISTORICAL AND ANALYTICAL EXPLORATIONS**

Thesis for a Doctor of Philosophy in Politics

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Submitted by Marios Filis to the University of Exeter
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THESIS ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the inner connection between politics and morality and the analytical challenges it has posed and still poses for political philosophy. In part one, I explore the problematic relationship between politics and morality as it has been conceived and analyzed by Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli and Weber. This exploration is a historical reconstruction, a ‘genealogy’, of four major philosophical accounts concerning the tension between the moral demands of politics and the moral demands of ‘ordinary’ life. The historical reconstruction aims at revealing the philosophical complexity of the problems that characterize the relationship between politics and morality. It is set to show that those problems have some basic perennial features which remain unresolved until nowadays.

In part two, following the conclusions of the historical reconstruction, I make the central contention that the insoluble fragmentation of moral values that characterizes our world is central to the understanding of the inner connection between politics and morality. For this reason I analyze this connection from the perspective of moral pluralism, the philosophical tradition that conceives moral conflicts as the very essence of moral activity. My claim is that politics appears to be structurally opposed to specific types of moral values, because political moral values themselves are part of the fragmentation of morality. I support this claim with a further analysis of the moral divisions between the private, public and political spheres of conduct. My argument is that each of those spheres is permeated by a dominant type of moral values which is in permanent tension with the dominant types of values in the other two spheres of conduct. Finally, I make the case, that the usual aphorisms against the immorality of politicians and the famous concept of ‘dirty hands’ can be better understood when viewed as the inevitable result of the insoluble fragmentation of morality. I conclude, however, that the perennial attempts to achieve some sense of moral unity through politics indicate the special moral status we should attribute to political action.

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Introduction

It is not always obvious why someone interested in politics, or political discourse, needs to be concerned with questions of morality. Yet, it is the main argument of this thesis, politics should always be studied along with moral matters, since political action is at any given time an ethically formative affair. Conversely, politics is determined by moral concerns and moral behaviours. This may seem paradoxical because the relationship between politics and morality has been usually considered as, to say the least, problematic, contradictory and irrelevant to political action. Although political and moral discourses appear to be distinct in many respects, my intention is to offer a philosophical account of their interrelation after examining some key authors in the history of political philosophy who have devoted their attention to the relationship between politics and morality. The parallel study of politics and morality is necessary if we are to avoid both conceptual and practical misunderstandings regarding political action and the way it is morally judged. Hanna Pitkin speaks of moral discourse as ‘characteristically dialogue, personal conversation about an action that has gone wrong or done damage’, whereas, she argues, ‘political questions strike one as being of larger scope and scale, addressed to a larger audience, cast in a more general and impersonal mode.’¹ Although, as we are going to see in the rest of the thesis, this argument is generally correct, it does not follow from it that moral concerns are or should be irrelevant or contradictory to political concerns. On the contrary, politics pertains to human actions and problems which, even if not always clearly existential, are most of the time, directly or indirectly, related to a general ontological exegesis or moral purpose. Thus, since politics concerns human affairs, it will inevitably be grounded on moral predilections and it will inevitably have moral consequences. When we discuss about political problems we expect to find difficulties in identifying the right actions, in predicting their results and, at the end of the day, in resolving them, because there is always one or more related moral concerns to those problems. If there were none, then we would not find it difficult to conduct politics and also make moral judgments about

¹ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London (1993), 204.

politics. In a few words, political problems *are* problems because they have moral implications and, at the same time, are constituted upon moral arguments.

As a consequence, the general argument to be identified and analyzed in detail concerns the variety of parameters that have defined the relationship between politics and morality in the course of time and the importance that these parameters may have for a better understanding of this relationship in contemporary political philosophy. The question is why a better understanding of politics and political action needs a parallel understanding of morality and moral action and why the interaction of these two very generic concepts sometimes creates philosophical confusion and practical difficulties. Already, the identification of this relationship as a problem raises a number of questions regarding the ‘object’ and ‘approach’ of the thesis. One obvious question is why one would choose to study the problem both historically and analytically. One preliminary answer is that most attempts in political philosophy are either focused on its history or on its contemporary normative concepts, but never on both. My claim is that a comprehensive approach to problems that derive from the relationship between politics and morality should be based, first, upon a genealogy of all the relevant major arguments in the history of political philosophy; and second upon the contemporary analytical efforts which should be viewed as the conclusion of this genealogy. In other words, if we are to pursue a fuller understanding of a problematic concept we need to ascertain if and how it has been problematic for previous thinkers and authors.

This brings us to more specifically methodological issues. We can narrow down the methodological questions by assuming two possible objections. The first refers to the relation between philosophy and the study of political theory and whether it is valid to conflate those two disciplines, which are essentially focused on different subjects of analysis, in order to answer moral questions of political nature. This is what Pitkin thinks is the essence of philosophy according to Wittgenstein: ‘philosophizing is the attempt to get clear about the most significant and fundamental and inescapable features of the world and ourselves, not by gathering new facts but by reinvestigating the facts we already have. But that necessarily means getting clear about our concepts, their limits, and their implications.’² Thus philosophy is the study of the concepts that reflect the human condition and the central forms of human life. But where philosophy is concerned with those fundamental concepts, their discrepancies and their order, political

² Ibid., 294.

theory is concerned with the discrepancy and order in the relationship between our concepts and our institutional practices.³

Hence, it is my claim here, that the study of the relationship between politics and morality requires an approach that combines both ‘philosophizing’ about the human condition and theorizing about politics. This is political philosophy in its classical sense; that is, discourse regarding existential matters such as questions about the moral purposes of the human species along with questions of how it is better to organize human society in order to meet those purposes. Therefore, it is not merely, as Pitkin argues, that political philosophy is, presumably, occupied with central political concepts,⁴ but more importantly that it is concerned with ontological and moral concepts which interact in complicated ways with political concepts. For example we can conceive institutions, political organizations and political conduct in general, as ethical ideas: established in order to fulfil some ‘public or quasi-public moral purpose’;⁵ or we can think of moral habits as a fundamentally motivational force for specific kinds of political action. The relationship between politics and morality is, in either case, the epitome of what we should call political philosophy. This is a necessary methodological clarification because, as we shall examine at a later stage, some problems of political action and moral judgment –such as the famous ‘dirty hands’ case– are often conceptually confused, either because they are not established upon correct philosophical assumptions, or because they are not considered to be philosophically significant. In this sense, one could say that one of the purposes of this thesis is to point out the significance of moral philosophy in studying and understanding political theory and vice versa. On the same note, this thesis might contribute to the call for a return to political philosophy in its classical meaning, where progress is not identified with the fragmentation of disciplines within philosophy, but is based upon the ability to unify different spheres of knowledge in favour of a fuller understanding of the human condition.

The second and more essentially methodological objection which needs to be addressed, even if only briefly, refers to the approach of the relationship between politics and morality as a problem that has been perennially troubling for political philosophers in different times and in different societies. One of the basic aims of the thesis is to show

³ Ibid., 298-299.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bernard Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, Bibliolife (original edition: MacMillan and Co., New York 1899), 297.

that the relationship between politics and morality constitutes a problem which can be traced back to the origins of political philosophy. Indeed, the problem itself lies at the beginning of political philosophy. The argument is that this relationship has taken different forms through time but it is essentially deriving from similar philosophical difficulties which persist until nowadays. These philosophical difficulties can be briefly identified as the conflict between different moral values and their equivalent spheres of action, and the supposedly distinguished role of politics in attempting to resolve this conflict and achieve some sense of unity. The closest approach to this discussion in the relevant bibliography on politics and morality is John Parrish's argument on 'dirty hands' as a philosophical, political and historical problem which has been thought and analyzed in different versions, but as fundamentally the same, in the course of time.⁶ However, Parrish mainly focuses on an account of the 'real history of the problem'⁷ and he does not delve into the detailed philosophical conclusions which can be drawn from such a history.

The leap from a historical exposition of the problem of politics and morality to a contemporary philosophical solution of it, must necessarily address the methodological objections made by the school of historical contextualism. This is because any such leap from history to analysis is in danger of losing focus of the problem in several ways. Quentin Skinner argues that studying past works of philosophy in order to discover 'timeless elements' is not only impossible, but also pointless.⁸ In other words, concentrating on what the classic writers have said about 'fundamental concepts' and 'abiding questions' has nothing to offer to our contemporary understanding of a given philosophical or political problem.⁹ The main problem in such approaches is that of 'sheer anachronism'. 'A given writer', Skinner argues, 'may be "discovered" to have held a view, on the strength of some chance similarity of terminology, on some subject to which he cannot in principle have meant to contribute.'¹⁰ This sheer anachronism usually results into two types of 'mythologies' which, according to Skinner, make studies in political philosophy sometimes irrelevant and sometimes misleading. The first type is the 'mythology of doctrines' which consists of 'supplying the classic theorists with doctrines which are agreed to be proper to their subject, but which they have unaccountably failed to discuss'. Thus there is 'the question of whether any of

⁶ John Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (2007).

⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁸ Quentin Skinner, *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas*, History and Theory, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1969), 4.

⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

these writers ever intended, or even could have intended, to do what they are thus castigated for not having done.’¹¹

I believe that Skinner’s objection to careless extrapolations when one studies the history of political philosophy is reasonable, but not essential in denying the existence of perennial problems. To use Mark Bevir’s argument, such danger can be avoided when scholars pay the proper attention to philosophical problems and do not get carried away by their strong interest in them.¹² However, the second type of ‘mythology’ Skinner outlines in his seminal article on the *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas* is crucial for the validity of any study and argument made in relation to political philosophy and its history. This is the ‘mythology of coherence’ according to which it may become ‘dangerously easy for the historian to conceive it as his task to supply or find in each of these texts the coherence which they may appear to lack. Such danger is exacerbated [...] by the consequent temptation to find a “message” which can be abstracted from it and more readily communicated.’ And Skinner concludes, ‘[t]he writing of history of ethical and political philosophy is pervaded by this mythology.’¹³

Bevir’s answer to this objection is that scholars who find that an author expressed beliefs relevant to a contemporary problem can avoid this danger if they frame the problem in a sufficiently abstract manner.¹⁴ Obviously, the ‘mythology of coherence’ will always be a danger for every work in the genealogy of political and philosophical concepts. This is because defining the problems in ‘sufficiently abstract terms’ is a relative thing where the limits of abstraction are unclear. The outcome of such studies lies thus on our ability to reconstruct the views of past authors on problems which they might not have addressed directly. This reconstruction must be sufficiently but not overly abstract. However, the main objection posed by Skinner remains: are there any real perennial problems in political philosophy? Following Bevir’s response, perennial problems do exist for three reasons: first because when we translate a past work into our vocabulary it follows that we share some relevant beliefs with the past author. The possibility for translation entails that we can ponder a problem, which a past author addressed.¹⁵ Second, because past authors might have addressed a problem which authors who wrote on these authors also addressed and which we too can

¹¹ Ibid., 13, 16.

¹² Mark Bevir, ‘Are There Perennial Problems in Political Theory?’, *Political Studies*, XLII, (1994), 674.

¹³ Skinner, *Meaning and Understanding*, 16.

¹⁴ Bevir, ‘Are There Perennial Problems’, 670, 674.

¹⁵ Ibid., 664.

ponder.¹⁶ Finally, ‘provided that we are willing to frame problems in a suitably abstract fashion, we can find perennial problems, that is problems numerous authors have expressed beliefs about at least indirectly and we too can ponder.’¹⁷

The common logic that permeates those reasons for the acceptance of perennial problems is that, given the appropriate reconstruction, we can see the recurrence of a philosophical problem which has yet to be given a definite solution. This is why we call some works classic and some others not; because they express or set the context for perennial problems. It lies with us to reconstruct carefully the views of those classic authors and identify their beliefs and ideas as relevant to the problem *we* recognize as perennial.¹⁸ Furthermore, Skinner’s argument that ‘any argument is inevitably local or particular and because of this is unable to reach the level of abstraction necessary for it to be of trans-historical import’¹⁹ can be set aside considering the distinction between what is perennial and what is eternal, as explained in Rob Lamb’s critical article on Skinner’s *revised historical contextualism*. Lamb’s argument is that when Skinner invokes Collinwood’s claim about *eternal* problems he fails to see the division between *eternal* as meaning something ‘without beginning or end’ and *perennial* as meaning something that lasts for a very long time. To say that there are no *eternal* problems, as Collinwood has said, is to make an a priori ontological claim, whereas to say that there are no *perennial* problems, i.e. there cannot be philosophical arguments which last for a long time, is an empirical claim, which is deeply controversial.²⁰

In concluding the considerations of the possible methodological objections to such an approach in political philosophy, I want to argue that it is sufficient to keep in mind two basic conditions as summarized by Lamb: first, ‘Any claim that a particular problem is perennial or that a particular argument is intended for comprehension beyond its immediate temporal horizons requires substantiation with relevant evidence or argument’; and second, ‘whether or not past political thinkers are thought to have something to say will always be a matter of some contingency. Nevertheless, it seems inevitable that encounters and critical engagements with the concepts and intellectual traditions that have bequeathed to us, as well as those alien to us both temporally and culturally, have an obvious utility.’²¹ This means that the study of the relationship

¹⁶ Ibid., 669.

¹⁷ Ibid., 671.

¹⁸ Ibid., 670-671.

¹⁹ Robert Lamb, ‘Quentin Skinner’s revised historical contextualism: a critique’, *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2009), 60.

²⁰ Ibid., 60-61.

²¹ Ibid., 70.

between politics and morality, with all the contextual variables and parameters considered, could be justifiably characterized as a perennial problem with no definite solution so far. The uncertain limits of abstraction in writing the intellectual history of the problem do not entail that it is not possible to identify past beliefs as relevant to the given problem, provided we fulfill the above basic conditions.²²

Hence, the thesis is divided into two parts: the first, as already mentioned, is a genealogy of the arguments made in relation to the problematic nature of the relationship between politics and morality. The genealogy is not written purely as history of political thought. Instead, it is a reconstruction of arguments made by major figures in political philosophy in order to trace the roots of our problem and set the frame for its contemporary understanding. This reconstruction has been based upon the indispensable guides of Janet Coleman's *History of Political Thought*²³ and Alasdair MacIntyre's *Short History of Ethics*;²⁴ Stuart Hampshire's *Innocence and Experience*,²⁵ where he analyses the perennial features of the intersection between politics and morality as these have been exposed by Plato, Aristotle and, most importantly, Machiavelli; and Wilhelm Hennis's *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction*,²⁶ for the final chapter of the genealogy on Weber's political philosophy.

Thus, the reconstruction starts with Plato's political philosophy as the first attempt to reconcile the contradictory demands between what ancient Greeks called *dikaiosune* (mainly understood as an individual virtue) and the affairs of the *polis*. This is the distinction that we nowadays roughly translate as the conflict between private and political virtue. The moral man, Plato argued in the *Apology*,²⁷ cannot fulfill his political purposes unless he is ready to risk his individual virtue. For Plato, the discovery that shook the foundations of philosophy was the realization that the virtuous man, i.e. Socrates the philosopher, cannot and would not survive in this world because politics structurally poses and will always pose impossible demands on private virtue. However, Plato then developed the exact opposite argument. In the *Crito*,²⁸ we find

²² Bevir, 'Are There Perennial Problems', 670.

²³ Janet Coleman, *A History of Political Thought: From Ancient Greece to Early Christianity Vol. 1 & 2*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, Malden and Victoria (2000).

²⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, Routledge, London and New York (1998).

²⁵ Stuart Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, Penguin Books, London (1989).

²⁶ Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction*, Allen & Unwin, London (1988).

²⁷ Plato, 'Apology', in Thomas G. West (ed.), *Four Texts On Socrates, Plato's Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito, and Aristophanes' Clouds*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London (1998). Henceforth all four works will be quoted in abbreviated form with lines in brackets within the text.

²⁸ Plato, 'Crito', in Thomas G. West (ed.), *Four Texts On Socrates*.

Plato arguing against private virtue as a corrosive element to the political morals and the good of the *polis*. Thus, the problem of politics and morality, and in consequence the ‘discipline’ of political philosophy, came to life because Plato recognized this fundamental contradiction. His attempt to resolve this conflict between private and political virtue in the *Republic*²⁹ is still nowadays every scholar’s starting point for a study of such matters. Plato, by discovering the true meaning of *dikaiosune* (or what we badly translate as morality or justice) and offering an account of politics which would make possible their integration in a unified concept, wished to eradicate the conflict and thus the existential threat to the philosopher’s way of life.

However, although Plato’s insights in the nature of knowledge and its relation to morality and politics are indispensable, his tentative epistemological assumptions and his extreme political conclusions are necessarily the limited outcome of ancient Athens’ social context. Aristotle is the next stop in this genealogy of politics and morality not only because he offered a stringent criticism of Plato’s misconceptions (and all the more impressive that he did so through the same social and pedagogical spectacles), but also, and more importantly, because he developed an equally powerful argument regarding the interrelation between moral and political virtue, by adding the intellectual element as a separate factor. Thus, if it was Plato who first set the problem and defined its features, it was Aristotle who systematically tried to explain and resolve the causes of the tension between political and moral virtue without resorting to epistemological leaps of metaphysical shortcuts, like Plato’s theory of the ‘Forms’. Aristotle’s most important works on political philosophy³⁰ constitute an attempt to understand the nature of both morality and politics based on statistical data about political constitutions and biological observations about the human nature. What Aristotle contributed was the idea that, although in his thought there is an objective moral end for men, in reality social structures and ethical ideals are so variable that they can hardly be subsumed under a common ontological aim. However, instead of trying to eradicate the variety of views

²⁹ Plato, *Republic*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (1998). Henceforth will be quoted in abbreviated form with lines in brackets within the text.

³⁰ The two major works that constitute the main body of Aristotle’s political philosophy are not individually written as political philosophy. However, the *Nicomachean Ethics* which is Aristotle’s moral theory and the *Politics* which is Aristotle’s political theory were intended by him to be read as works necessarily complementary to each other. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (2000), and Aristotle, *The Politics and The Constitution of Athens*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1996). Henceforth both works will be quoted in abbreviated form with lines in brackets within the text.

in favour of a utopian moral and political unity, as Plato did even though in an ideal sense, Aristotle chose to develop a political philosophy where politics is not structurally in conflict with morality. For him, politics and morality are in tension because we have not attributed the proper significance to the political nature of human beings. Thus in Aristotle's account there is no need to transform human beings and their political organization so as to make them fit with an arbitrary account of morality (contra Plato). Instead, we only need to cultivate in them a sense of moral purpose, which *naturally* means nothing else than being political. The reconciliation between politics and morality is therefore achieved smoothly without negating the nature of either politics and morality, or man.

The eradication of contradictions, the attempts to restore the moral unity of the political and the private, and the proposals of comprehensive political solutions to the existential questions of philosophy, are the features that characterize the classical school of political philosophy as represented by the fathers of this tradition, Plato and Aristotle. In order to find a break with the classical school, we must turn to Machiavelli, several centuries later, and his political agenda full of implicit assumptions about the relationship between politics and morality. Machiavelli expressed a period when political philosophy was rife with conceptual shifts regarding the essence of politics and morality. The moral ambiguity of Machiavelli's works, character and political purposes is the proof of his differentiation from thinkers and writers of the classical tradition who have always set a moral goal and attempted to reach it by offering accounts of political organization based on philosophically sound moral reasoning. At first glance, there is no ontology to be found in Machiavelli's political works or a statement which clearly indicates to an underlying moral philosophy in his thought. For the first time, it seems, a political work of great importance for its contemporary and future generations did not aim at offering an account of politics and morality in unity. Nevertheless, Machiavelli can and has been considered as a fundamental writer in the history of political philosophy. This is because, despite all the ambiguity and confusion that he created, Machiavelli speaks of the same problem to which Plato and Aristotle spoke. With regard to Machiavelli, the focus of this thesis is not on the correctness of this or that interpretation, or the confusion created by the dichotomy between the *Prince*³¹ and the *Discourses*,³² but on the essential resources we can draw from his works regarding a fuller understanding of our problem.

³¹ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1988).

³² Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, Penguin Books, London (1970).

For example, Quentin Skinner and David Wooton endorse the traditional ‘Machiavellian’ interpretation according to which Machiavelli was the primary thinker who openly doubted that morality is a necessary thing for good politics.³³ Political virtue was for the first time so clearly disconnected and irrelevant to moral virtue. Whether or not Machiavelli intended to put forward such a view is irrelevant for our present concerns. What is relevant is that intentionally or not Machiavelli’s works initiated the recognition of political ethics as a different, or better, opposite thing to ‘moral ethics’. Equally indicative for Machiavelli’s contribution to the discourse of political philosophy is Isaiah Berlin’s³⁴ interpretation of Machiavelli’s works as fully philosophical but proposing a radical division between two different and furiously conflicting moral worlds: the pagan-republican and the Christian-apolitical world. Finally, it is even possible to reconstruct Machiavelli, like Erica Benner does in her unconventional interpretation,³⁵ as a deeply philosophical thinker who in reality aimed at finding a universal moral principle as a stable guide for good and effective politics. Thus, the philosophical ambiguity of Machiavelli’s writing is all the more suitable for a number of interpretations on the meaning he attributed to the relationship between politics and morality. For political philosophers, and possibly not for historical contextualists, Machiavelli’s political works constitute not only the ideal transitional point from the classical authors to modernity, but also a fountain of ideas and concepts regarding the possible ways that the relationship between politics and morality can be studied.

A comprehensive genealogy of the relationship between politics and morality should include several more major thinkers of politics and moral philosophy before and after Machiavelli. Hence it may seem strange that for such a study the final philosophical reconstruction takes place along the lines of the work of sociologist Max Weber. Weber’s political writings are not extensive and, like Machiavelli’s, are not rich with points and observations about moral philosophy. Nevertheless, if we assume that Machiavelli was the transitional point from classical to modern political philosophy because of all the different perspectives he made available for future thinkers, then we can assume that Weber was the transitional point from modern to contemporary political philosophy. The criterion for such categorization of Weber amongst political

³³ See Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Vol. 1.*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1998), and David Wooton, ‘introduction’, in Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis (1995).

³⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (2001).

³⁵ Erica Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford (2009).

philosophers is once again his conception of the relationship between politics and morality and its philosophical consequences, as best summarized in his works *Politics as a Vocation*³⁶ and *The Nation and Economic Policy*.³⁷ Machiavelli's cynical, though ambiguous, divisions between the spheres of politics and morality, virtue and practical effectiveness and thus the good man and the good ruler are clarified and explained by Weber through the spectacles of utilitarian and deontological moral theories. These theories constitute philosophical traditions that dominated modernity and are still very strong nowadays. For Weber, the tension between politics and morality derives from the idea that the consequences of an action (as derived from utilitarian philosophies) and its intrinsic value (as derived from deontic theories) cannot always be reconciled. History and political philosophy have taught us that this dichotomy is somewhat simplistic. They have also taught us that the complex fragmentation of moral values makes such reconciliation impossible.

Politics, for Weber, is still man's attempt to give meaning to collective existence but it achieves this through struggle and compromise; not through concepts of moral unity. Thus, although the tentative nature of the relationship between politics and morality has remained the same in the course of time, we can discern a progressive movement: from Plato's unity of private and political virtue under the auspices of a dominating philosophy; to Aristotle's more realistic account of the inter-determination between the moral and political spheres of life; to Machiavelli's ambiguous argument that this unity or interrelation might not be what it seems to be at first glance; and finally, to Weber's conclusion that our moral universe is so fragmented that we can only compromise and try our best to remain political beings as our best chance to preserve the moral importance of our existence. The acceptance of moral pluralism, as the penultimate obstacle for the unity to which politics aspires, signifies the end of the genealogy of the problem and the –final– transition to our contemporary understanding of this relationship.

With this argument in mind we must turn to the second part of the thesis which draws upon the concepts and observations of the philosophical reconstructions of past authors in order to improve *our* understanding of the problematic nature of politics and

³⁶ Max Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', in H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Routledge, Oxon and New York (1998).

³⁷ Max Weber, 'The Nation State and Economic Policy', in Peter Lassman & Ronald Speirs (eds.), *Weber's Political Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1994).

morality. First, we need to consider the fundamental irreconcilable dualisms in Plato and Aristotle's political philosophies. Then, we have the variety of interpretations of Machiavelli's works as the outcome of his own moral ambiguity. Finally, we have Weber's conception of the conflict between one's being responsible for political actions that might seem immoral and one's moral integrity based on moral fragmentation. These arguments should indicate that the problematic features of the relationship between politics and morality are determined by our inability to create unitary accounts of morality. Contemporary political philosophy struggles with the concept of 'moral dilemmas' because if there are indeed real insoluble moral conflicts then the understanding of our problem takes a crucial turn. The problem of moral dilemmas continues from Weber's conclusion about the fragmentation of moral values and it explores the limits of moral judgment in politics. Christopher Gowans' anthology of several articles from major contemporary thinkers on *Moral Dilemmas*³⁸ is a comprehensive guide for the argument made here. Its basic structure is that if on the one hand the fragmentation of moral values is not only apparent but real, then moral dilemmas are an unavoidable feature of our lives and the tension between politics and morality takes the form of such a dilemma. If on the other hand moral pluralism is a misconception –as the dominant unitary moral theories of modernity dictate– then the tension between politics and morality is due to our inadequacies in applying or following the right moral guides and principles. The argument pursued in this thesis is that not only are there moral conflicts due to the irreducible moral pluralism in the human universe, but also that the acceptance of moral pluralism is the only sufficient basis upon which we can achieve a better understanding of political action and its moral judgment.

Obviously, a pluralistic account of the relationship between politics and morality requires the clarification of several factors, against a monistic explanation of morality which does not recognize the distinction between the private and the political at all, and thus it rejects the problematic nature of the relationship between politics and morality. The most important clarification, and a pivotal point in this thesis, is with regard to the differentiation of the concepts of the private, the public and the political, in terms of their moral value and its practical connotations. As it is going to be evident, the genealogy of the relationship between politics and morality has proved very useful in identifying that the major factor which divides classical and modern times is the difference between the concepts of the public and the political. In this sense, the

³⁸ Christopher W. Gowans (ed.), *Moral Dilemmas*, Oxford (1987).

perennial problem of moral pluralism for politics has in contemporary times been exacerbated. This extra division is something which is not always evident in the contemporary literature. Thus, contemporary accounts on the tension between politics and morality are based on the distinction, most prominently made by Thomas Nagel, between the personal and impersonal moral standpoints. And although thinkers of moral pluralism recognize that there are several types of moral value which are irreducible to each other, when it comes to politics and morality this pluralism is often reduced to a basic dichotomy between utility and principle.³⁹ However, there is not a comprehensive account of the fundamental distinction and the antagonistic relationship between the public and the political and, naturally, it is not always possible to comprehend fully how these are interrelated with private ethical considerations. Susan Mendus,⁴⁰ Lynne McFall,⁴¹ Martin Hollis⁴² and Thomas Nagel⁴³ are here the key thinkers who have to offer significant insights on the problem but sometimes without any conclusive philosophical argument and sometimes without and conclusive political propositions.

Thus, while moving from the ancient authors to Weber's definitions regarding politics and morality, we should notice that the understanding of the problem changes significantly because the concept of the public is now added to the tension between the private and the political. This addition is not a trivial one, merely relating to contemporary contextual understandings of the political. Instead it is the result of deep structural changes that took place in modernity and transformed morally our world. Politics has always had a special status in regard to resolving problems of moral disunity despite being part of the problem itself. However, nowadays the special moral status of politics is conflated with the moral importance of the public in resolving conflicts. Thus, in addition to the usual distinctions between the intrinsic value of private morality and political utility, we now have public moral rules of impartiality, which sometimes significantly overlap with our personal moral considerations and sometimes are an indispensable element of good politics. Our inability to clarify the

³⁹ For example, see Parrish's argument on the historical versions of 'dirty hands' where he claims that the transition from antiquity to modernity can be seen in the replacement of the distinction between public benefit and moral virtue with the distinction between utilitarianism and deontology. Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics*, 18.

⁴⁰ Susan Mendus, *Politics and Morality*, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden (2009).

⁴¹ Lynne McFall, 'Integrity', *Ethics*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (October 1987), 5-20.

⁴² Martin Hollis, 'Dirty Hands', *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (October 1982), 385-398.

⁴³ Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (1991), and 'Ruthlessness in Public Life', in Stuart Hampshire (ed.), *Public and Private Morality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1978).

overlap and set the limits between each sphere of action and its moral implications aggravates the fragmentation of moral values and thus the conflict between politics and morality.

Moral fragmentation is therefore depicted nowadays in the conflict between private moral integrity, which is constituted by general personal ethical considerations; political virtue, or what is commonly called the political ethic which gives priority to the utility and consequences of political action; and public morality which is particularly related to the public official's virtues of impartiality. How do we set the priorities in order to achieve some sense of unity of moral purpose in contemporary life and politics? Each of these moral spheres and the equivalent social roles have acquired over time an autonomous and irreducible value, despite the fact that in reality they all overlap with each other and are fundamentally inter-determined. This is what makes the transition from a concept of politics and morality based on the classical dualism between private and political virtue –that so much permeates the works of Plato, Aristotle and Machiavelli– to the contemporary (mis)understanding about political action and moral judgment.

Indicative of this contemporary misunderstanding and philosophical confusion is the concept of 'dirty hands', the analysis of which constitutes the conclusion of this thesis, in favour of a more philosophical and thus moral understanding of contemporary politics. Often, the expression 'dirty hands' is related to conceptions of politics and politicians as generally morally corrupted and '*worse* than ordinary citizens.'⁴⁴ Michael Walzer is the seminal figure in the debate about the meaning of 'dirty hands' and he was the first to set the problem on a basis of moral pluralism.⁴⁵ Taking Walzer's argument as the starting point, my purpose is to point out that the concept of 'dirty hands' is the contemporary political expression of the classical philosophical problem, as it has been traced through the genealogy of politics and morality.⁴⁶ Stephen de Wijze speaks of the

⁴⁴ Stephen de Wijze, 'Towards a Political Ethic: Exploring the Boundaries of a Moral Politics', *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. XXIII, No. 3 (1994), 191.

⁴⁵ Michael Walzer, 'Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Winter, 1973), 160-180.

⁴⁶ For example see Bernard Bosanquet's argument in *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, where he makes an argument, indicative of the 'perpetuity' of our problem, in strikingly contemporary terms: 'Again, I think, we must distinguish between acts essentially private and essentially public. To steal or murder, to lie, or to commit personal immorality, for instance, as we said, cannot be a public act [...] Ultimately, indeed, it may be true that there is no act which is incapable of justification, supposing some extreme alternative; and in this sense, but in this sense only, it might be that, treating the interest of a commonwealth like any other ethically imperative interest, such acts might be relatively capable of justification. But this justification would only mean that some supreme interest was subserved by them, and would have no special relation to the supposed public character of the interest. It is then a conflict of duties. And the commoner occurrence, which results in doubtful acts, probably is that an agent, charged

‘strong ambivalence [that] pervades our attitudes towards politicians.’ ‘We want them’, he says, ‘to be morally upstanding men and women, honourable persons who we can trust to look after our well being and even our lives. Yet we also recognise that for politicians to do their jobs well, they may engage in deception, compromise, betrayal and even murder.’⁴⁷ I want to argue that this ambivalence is the result of the philosophical confusion about the fragmentation of value and the relationship between politics and morality. This is so, because in cases of morally complex political situations we try to apply our personal ethical considerations and naturally fail to come up with consistent moral judgments or a reasonable understanding of political action. Thus, ‘[w]e end up inappropriately, sometimes dangerously, judging politicians far too harshly and sometimes not harshly enough.’⁴⁸ My aim is therefore similar in exploring ‘the boundaries of a moral politics’.

Nevertheless, my intention is philosophically to extend the field of this study and argue that contemporary concepts such as the ‘fragmentation of moral value’ and the ‘dirty hands’ problem are interrelated in a deeper degree than it is often thought. Thus, when we aim at a conception of moral politics it is not always sufficient to state the obvious, i.e. there is a contradiction, a conflict which cannot be resolved unless we are ready to make sacrifices. Despite the self-evident argument that states, politicians, public officials and so on cannot always be treated in a similar manner we treat the actors of private immoralities, we need to be in a position where we can –whether we are politicians, public officials or simple citizens– make moral judgments appropriate to our roles in social life. In other words, a better understanding of our moral universe in relation to political action, justification and punishment is not only necessary as a ‘set of principles which can work as a guide for the politician’,⁴⁹ but it is necessary as an indispensable element for the improvement of the human condition in its classical Weberian meaning.

Thus, to begin with the first part of the thesis, the first chapter is devoted to exploring the origins of the philosophical problem that is treated herein. These origins are to be found in Plato’s three main works in relation to the conflict between private and political virtue (*Apology* and *Crito*) and the resolution of this conflict according to

with some public service, finds it easiest to promote it by some act of rascality, and acts on his idea.’ Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, 325-326.

⁴⁷ De Wijze, ‘Towards a Political Ethic’, 191.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

Plato's radical propositions (*Republic*). Plato's political philosophy purports to explain the relationship between politics, morality and knowledge and offers solutions to the problems of this relationship within the context of the ancient Greek *polis*. These solutions are essentially based on a unified conception of morality and politics.

The second chapter examines the second major classical account on the tension between the contemplative, individual life and political activity, as developed by Aristotle (second in chronological order, but not in terms of philosophical significance). Aristotle provides a thorough analysis of the way in which moral characters and collective practices determined each other, as the latter are realized in the sphere of politics. At the same time, he insists that there are insurmountable obstacles that everyday practical reason encounters in dealing with human nature and the complexity of human life.

Chapter three makes the leap to Machiavelli and investigates three contrasting interpretative traditions of his works. The juxtaposition of these interpretations (and their variations) aims at revealing that Machiavelli's importance as a political thinker lies exactly in his ambiguity and/or cynicism in relation to the place morality has in conducting politics. In this thesis, I offer no solution as to which interpretation really captures the essence of Machiavelli's works and, accordingly, his own intentions as a political figure and as a writer. Instead, the importance here lies in the depth and variety of the analytical tools that the exploration of Machiavelli's political advice (or philosophy, depending on the interpretation) offers us, in the quest for a better understanding of the relationship between politics and morality.

In chapter four, the final chapter of the first part of the thesis, we make the transition from classical and Renaissance understandings of politics and morality to a more contemporary one. Weber is the transitional and maybe the key figure in this progressive movement from attempts to offer either coherent accounts of morality and politics or accounts where morality is irrelevant to politics, to accounts where morality and politics are strongly interrelated, but at the same time always conflicting. Weber contemplates the existential predicament of the public figure and the political leader in such permanent conditions of moral fragmentation.

Chapter five of Part two introduces the central concept of 'moral dilemmas'. In line with the conclusions we have drawn from the genealogy of the problematic relationship between politics and morality, we analyse the possibility that such a relationship is part of an irreducible moral pluralism, which entails an inevitable conflict between moral values. This view contrasts with traditional and dominant explanations

of morality, which are based on some particular comprehensive principles, and deny the possibility that morality can have a conflicting nature, and thus that there can be a conflicting relationship between politics and morality. Instead, in this thesis the basic claim that politics and morality constitute a problematic field of analysis is based on the acceptance that their tension is strongly related to the concept of ‘moral dilemmas’. Thus, one of the conclusions here is that monistic philosophical traditions cannot capture the essence of this relationship.

After having rejected such monistic explanations of morality, and consequently of the possibility for political conduct to be faultless, in chapter six we explore the core argument of this thesis, that moral pluralism in politics is represented by the distinction between three fundamental spheres of moral agency: the private, the public and the political. Each sphere is permeated by a different set of dominant moral values which are by nature conflicting but also very often overlapping, contributing thus further to the confusion regarding the relationship between politics and morality.

Finally, in chapter seven we examine the concept of ‘dirty hands’ in political action as a way of evaluating our arguments thus far. Several interpretations of ‘dirty hands’ have been developed in contemporary political theory based on different understandings of the main elements that characterize the relationship between politics and morality. This is the particular contribution that this thesis aims to offer: an understanding of political decisions and moral judgment based on a philosophical account that takes on board the conflicting nature of morality, while at the same time accepting both the possibility of moral action in politics and the importance of morality for political action.

PART ONE

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICS AND MORALITY: A PERENNIAL PROBLEM

1. The Genesis of Political Philosophy:
Plato's Attempt to Treat Politics and Morality as One

A) Crito and the Apology: The origin of the debate between politics and morality

Politics in classical Greece was not always related to philosophy. It did not always engage in ontological and ethical arguments and it was mainly occupied with the practical organization of the community, whereas philosophy was related to natural science. Socrates was the first thinker who attempted to offer a conception of politics as a matter of science, in order to fight against the political and moral conventionalism of his time. The Platonic figure of Socrates offers the best introduction to the combination of both worlds; i.e. political philosophy. The Socratic dialogues illustrate not only the conflict between politics and philosophy but also the manner in which they are or should be connected when one recognizes that it is meaningless to develop political arguments without any moral basis; that is, the aim of politics should in one way or another be the 'good life'. Plato, thus, attempted to demonstrate the fact that political philosophy is concerned with political organization and institutions based on practical social necessities and pure philosophy is concerned with a freedom of mind which is in principle contrary to these necessities. Then he tried to show whether this contradiction can be resolved, at least at a theoretical level. Socrates' practical predicament and teachings are therefore organized by Plato in order to identify the fundamental concepts within the problem of incompatibility between morality, or justice, in its most abstract sense, and real politics. Plato's conclusion, in the *Republic*, is in simple words that the problem basically lies within politics and therefore we only need to transform the structure of political organization in order to realize universal and unchanging justice. Nevertheless, in his latest work, he abandoned this very ambitious project in favour of a more conservative political philosophy. In the *Laws*⁵⁰ his interest in absolute justice and perfect collective virtue is substituted for stability and a political construction which is more legally fortified than morally excellent.

The different approach regarding the relationship between politics and morality in the *Republic* and the *Laws* may indicate that Plato eventually realized that politics and philosophy are indeed incompatible. One may say that he already suspected that,

⁵⁰ Plato, *The Laws*, Penguin Books, London (2004).

considering the contrast of positions in the *Apology* and *Crito*.⁵¹ Nevertheless, it may have been his incurably inquisitive nature that pressed him to test in practice, and repeatedly fail in Syracuse, the theoretical experiment developed in the *Republic*. The conclusion of the *Republic*, that it is politics we need to change and not philosophy, depends on the epistemological assumption according to which we have already discovered what true morality or justice is. In other words, philosophy has already achieved its final aim and it lies with politics to realize this aim, now collectively. Whether Plato took this assumption seriously is a contested issue; even though this is not a matter of great importance. The important thing is that he recognized and developed the contradictions between politics and philosophy, virtue and political activity, reason and practice, and so on. Thus, he brought moral considerations into politics, and he did so in a philosophical manner,⁵² i.e. philosophy, which was until then only occupied with the explanation of natural phenomena, was now used in order to reveal the purpose of human societies.

Before Plato's final conclusions in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, Plato had made sure to expose the main elements which constituted the tension between political activity and the contemplative or philosophic life. In the *Apology* Plato presents the philosopher's case against the city. He wishes to show how true knowledge –which is in his theory *de facto* related to true justice following the fundamental Socratic teaching– will always be fatally threatened by a community of people who has learnt to engage in sophistry and quibbles when arguing about public matters. Morality is thus linked with a private pursue of happiness or the good life, whereas politics is only concerned with public matters, with its own moral norms which are usually nothing more than what the most powerful arguments of the day counsel. In Plato's eyes, Socrates' project was to make the Athenian citizens understand first that the human life should not depend on the will of mysterious beings, but on reasonable judgments;⁵³ and second, that the good life might be possible at the collective level if self-assertion ceases to be the main characteristic of public life, and philosophy becomes its guiding force. His main point was thus in favour of reason and against arbitrary arguments. Whenever

⁵¹ Thomas G. West, introduction in *Four Texts On Socrates*.

⁵² Philosophical and scientific can be used in this context interchangeably, since philosophy was for the ancients the equivalent of the generic contemporary term 'science'.

⁵³ In Plato's *Euthyphro* the argument against piety as an arbitrary authority, is an argument reminiscent of Machiavelli's 'pious cruelty' which will be discussed at a later chapter.

the latter prevailed, the good life, or justice, would be confined within the private sphere of human conduct and it would always be threatened by the *polis*.⁵⁴

This conclusion was obviously devastating considering the contextual characteristics of the ancient Greek community. Up until then, it would have been inconceivable to think of a 'good life' outside the *polis*. It was the first time that the community was not perceived as a universally accepted moral end in itself. This ominous discovery required a radical approach so as to resolve the strongly paradoxical situation. Socrates essentially proposed a re-education of the whole community. His purpose was to explore the limits of reason not only within the individual soul, but now within the whole *polis*. If everyone is able to conquer philosophy then the local community will once again acquire a universal moral qualification and the lives of its citizens will once again become worth living. At the very start of the *Apology*, he seems to suggest that reason will be significantly more limited in public arguments. Nevertheless, he demands to overcome those limits and, naturally, his project failed.⁵⁵

In the *Crito* Plato makes the opposite case, this time against the philosopher and in favour of the *polis* and its laws and those who implement and obey them. The private sphere of conduct becomes meaningless without a wider context of political reference, even in the case of the philosopher who attempts to override public matters in favour of moral fulfillment. Philosophy is irrelevant if it undermines the established way of life. Without the political community, the philosopher would not even have the chance to explore what true justice is and what its relation with politics should be. The wise individual is the outcome of the polis and by disobeying and corrupting the laws individual wisdom destroys its own birth place (*Crito*, 49c-51a). Thus, the virtues of philosophy (universal justice) must give way to the people (local wisdom). At the end, Socrates confesses to Crito that his conviction of death was rightful: without political laws, and regardless of their moral basis, the 'idea of the philosopher' would be an impossibility; Socrates himself would not even have existed. His own attack on Athenian laws was therefore unjustified. So, in Plato's own thought, if Socrates knew the limits of reason he should not have pursued to impose it upon the *polis*. Instead he should have realized that the laws provide a practical man's equivalent of philosophy.⁵⁶ The limits of human nature in terms of rational capacities reveal that it might be better, both ontologically and practically speaking, to respect the laws instead of trying to

⁵⁴ West, *ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

respect an always elusive universal truth. Tradition, customs and civic beliefs are tangible and stable. Philosophy is a corrosive power which creates unstable citizens. The rational member of a community is a skeptic who will never be convinced by the parochial values of the *polis*. Instead he will always pursue the universal, thus undermining not only the seemingly unimportant and quite possibly false beliefs of his fellow citizens, but as a consequence the existence of the city itself.

The question is of course why Socrates insisted on his argument in favour of reason which eventually led to his death. Maybe his purpose was actually to pose the problem in a manner that would make everyone contemplate it seriously. Or he wished to set the moral standards for future political activity. This would explain Socrates' case as a 'deliberative failure.'⁵⁷ Plato had to present both arguments because he wished to state the obvious contradiction. He described the Socratic case as the crucial instantiation in human history of this seemingly irreconcilable conflict between morality –as field of philosophy– and politics. Moreover he went further and posed the problem in terms of priorities. If reason and law constitute two different moral codes –depicting the conflict between philosophy and politics– then it is essential to find out whether we can assign priority to one moral code over the other so as to avoid moral and political inconsistencies. What is at stake for Plato is not only the moral integrity of those involved in political activities –as in the case of Socrates– but also political effectiveness of the community, in terms of stability and power. In the end, though, what matters most is the 'good life' universally speaking. Of course, assigning priority must be based upon some kind of epistemological discovery. Deciding whether Socrates' private virtue is more significant overall than what was considered at the time the public norms of conduct, and vice versa, becomes a matter of deciding whether public virtue essentially derives from private virtue, or the other way around. Plato in contrasting the *Apology* and *Crito* seems to reject the possibility of a solution to the problem when posed in this form. He seems to suggest that if we attempted to resolve it in terms of priority of one sphere of conduct over the other we would always end up with a conflict or a dilemmatic situation, because some will decide in favour of the one and others in favour of the other. On the one hand (in the *Crito*), there is the argument that the laws are non-corruptible whereas the human beings are, and that moral integrity is only possible because of the laws themselves (*Crito*, 53a-53c). On the other hand (in the *Apology*), philosophy is a way of life which is intrinsically good and overriding.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 23. This is West's own term and it is unclear whether he means a 'deliberate failure' or a 'failure in deliberation'. In this argument the first meaning is, I think, more correct.

The moral incorruptibility of the human being should be over and above the law because no one can guarantee the moral quality of those laws or those who make them.

Of course, the two arguments are contradictory. In addition, each argument seems to be overriding from its own perspective. Thus, every time we attempt to synthesize those two different moral codes, it will result into deep injustice for both of them. For Plato –following the basic Socratic teaching that knowledge is justice– this vicious circle could only be broken if human beings discovered an incontestably true concept of what morality or justice is, in abstract terms. The epistemological assumption made in the *Republic* is therefore that such a concept truly exists and it is followed by an equally strong ontological assumption that if some managed to acquire this kind of knowledge they would be destined to override the contradiction and realize justice or morality in the *polis*. True knowledge reveals that there are not really two distinct moral codes and thus two separate and conflicting spheres of conduct, but that there is only one true virtuous way of living which combines private, or individual virtue, with public, that is with reference to the *polis*, virtue. Private virtue should not oppose public justice. When it does, it is only because the political communities are corrupt; and reasonable arguments are impossible within a corrupt environment. This moral corruption is the outcome of lack of knowledge. Thus, the virtue of the philosopher (who has this knowledge) should not signify resignation from politics, but it should mean that the philosopher will act in a consistent manner within both the private and the public spheres (*Apology*, 32b-33a). In the end, though, a Platonic predisposition towards the wise person or private virtue is obvious.⁵⁸ For Plato, the starting point is similar to Socrates': that there is an abstract idea of justice which must be accessible at least to a handful of people. This in turn means that there really is a way to make sure that a few human beings can and will be incorruptible. In the *Republic*, one of the major philosophical problems is to persuade this handful of wise people, the philosophers, to govern. Because, according to Plato's position, only then can we aspire for a just and virtuous political community.

⁵⁸ It is unclear whether it is Plato's own predisposition or the consequence of his position. This is parallel to the cyclical argument that he makes in the *Republic* regarding the unification of politics and philosophy. Does the philosopher have priority over the public man because of Plato's theory of knowledge, or is Plato's theory of knowledge the starting point for his political positions because he is a philosopher?

B) Democracy against Virtue

Plato's categorization of political constitutions in the *Republic* and his criticism against democracy and the democratic moral character constitute an ideal summary of how he understood the idea that bad ethics will always lead to bad politics and vice versa. Athenian politics was a perfect example of the tension between virtue and political activity. The *Republic* was thus not only his theoretical solution to the problem of how to reconcile politics with justice. It was also the pinnacle of his criticism against Athenian democracy, which in his mind was responsible for both the inability to govern effectively the polis in practical terms and, most importantly, the moral degradation of its citizens. The correlation between the unsound democratic moral character and the disastrous democratic constitution reinforced Plato's conviction that virtue is something different than what most people believed it was. It was also indicative that politics is not merely concerned with the management of power but that its purpose is the 'good life'. As the case of Socrates demonstrated, the radical discovery which troubled the classical philosophers was related with the tension between private virtue and political activity. Ordinary corrupt activities are easy to condemn and maybe to correct; but bringing together two separate, and up until then opposing, codes of conduct, that of philosophy –mainly understood as science– and that of politics, seemed to be crucial for the well-being of both the individual and the collectivity.

Plato's general philosophy is thus political in that he is in pursuit of restoring the unity of politics and morality against the predominant view at his time, according to which one can either be a virtuous man or a good politician, but never both. 'For in fact Plato's morals and Plato's politics are closely interdependent. Each logically requires to be completed by the other.'⁵⁹ It was therefore his purpose to show that only the virtuous man can make a good politician. This means that the *Republic* incorporates a comprehensive theory of leadership as a means of changing the foundations of human societies: individual virtue should not exclude collective virtue; instead it should be used in order to promote it. 'Political philosophy is a search for fixity and this requires the abolition of the distinction between public and private.'⁶⁰ Plato was to make clear that collective leadership is doomed to fail politically and morally, a claim deriving mainly from an elitist conception of knowledge and in consequence an elitist understanding of moral excellence. The *Republic* is therefore an attempt to answer or

⁵⁹ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 49.

⁶⁰ Peter Johnson, *Politics, Innocence, and the Limits of Goodness*, Routledge, London and New York (1988), 29.

resolve paradoxes and dilemmas, which derive from this problematic relationship between politics and morality and the consequent (in)ability to govern well. This relationship was always troubling for philosophers and politicians, at least since Socrates' time. Plato's answer is fundamentally antidemocratic and anti-pluralist in most aspects: educational, political and ethical. 'A collective body cannot be a substitute for the true philosopher' or 'democracy cannot decide what is right and wrong' is the ultimate claim. The Platonic theory of knowledge is the core of this argument. Though, even if Plato's epistemological assumptions were correct, there would be a serious practical problem regarding how to initiate a political constitution according to which the community would freely accept to be guided by a closed club: a philosophic ruling class.

In democracy, according to Plato, each person does as he likes according to his individual preferences. 'It is "a supermarket of constitutions" where no one is compelled to either govern or to obey those who do, where there are no fixed principles of behaviour...'⁶¹ Democratic rule creates moral disarray and politically speaking democracy symbolizes disunity, which, self-evidently for Plato, is the basic evil for both an individual soul and a community's morality. This disunity derives from lack of true knowledge –which can only be unifying– and is expressed through false and contradicting opinions. According to Plato, the man who seeks to master the people by persuading them is forced in order to do this to accept their standards and so mastered by them.⁶² Thus, the negative features that Plato ascribes to democratic political systems are personified in the moral character of the leader of the democratic mass. The democratic constitution, which Plato is here criticizing, is not of course a constitutional democracy in modern terms. Plato, starting from an elitist point of view, which might not have been too uncommon in his time, essentially describes a constitution which by today's standards would be named ochlocracy, where the populist forces (demagogues) are dominant and conduct politics not according to the 'rule of reason' but according to their personal interests and false opinions.

Thus, following the previous Socratic analysis, Plato's 'rule of reason' mainly demands a kind of self-control; an acceptance that there is some good which must guide us against our worse selves. Therefore, the Platonic democratic constitution seems to be the expression of an essential corrupting element against the quality which constitutes the basis for moral virtue; that is, self-discipline. Its opposite is self-assertion which

⁶¹ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 111.

⁶² MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 28.

naturally pursues the fulfilment of the soul's worst, appetitive, part. How is someone to persuade a community consisting of people with no self-discipline that they should be governed by someone else for their own good? The Socratic case illustrates that achieving individual and collective virtue, at the same time, is an impossible political aim, especially within a community of morally impotent men.

[In democratic states] they call self-control "cowardice" [...] they perpetuate the view that moderation shows lack of style and that frugality is stinginess [...] (*Republic*, 560d). [The democratic character] submits to every passing pleasure as its turn comes to hold office... He doesn't deprive any pleasure of its rights, but tends all of them equally [...] (561b) At frequent intervals, he gets involved in community affairs, and his public speaking and other duties keep him leaping around here, there, and everywhere. If military types arouse his admiration, he inclines towards military life; if it's businessmen, he's all for business. His lifestyle has no rhyme or reason, but thinks it enjoyable, free, and enviable and he never dispenses with it. (561d).

There is an implicit desperation in Plato's critique, in his advice to move from this destructive demagoguery and moral pluralism to an elitist and morally constructive leadership. It became his deep conviction that reason is the prerogative of only a handful of men and, to make it worse, the rest of the people cannot understand how this is related to their moral well-being. Philosophy is therefore not simply opposed to politics; it is opposed to the people as a multitude. The cause for this fierce attack on democracy is, as we have previously mentioned, Plato's attempt to reconcile politics and philosophy in a world where politics is represented by his decadent democratic fellow-citizens and philosophy which is represented by Socrates. On the one hand, in democratic Athens the idea of liberty was relative to a variety of interpretations and, on the other, there was the realization that this kind of relativism eventually leads to moral nihilism. A first natural response to the Socratic case was that the morally good man cannot effectively engage in political conduct, and thus help his fellow citizens to improve morally, without either corrupting his own moral character or being in danger to be killed or ostracized.

Now do not be vexed with me when I speak the truth. For there is no human being who will preserve his life if he genuinely opposes either you or any other multitude and prevents many unjust and unlawful things from happening in the city. (*Apology*, 31e)

This contradiction or moral paradox, as described in the *Apology*, and followed by the opposite argument in *Crito*, entails that the moral progress of society is trapped within a vicious circle wherein political activity, which should ideally work as the guiding force for moral improvement, actually impedes it. Socrates' death was the unquestionable contemporary affirmation of that fact, and it was by no means a matter of coincidence, according to Plato, that it was a democratic government which decided to put to death the greatest philosopher that had ever lived. Only in a democracy – where the souls of the citizens were in such moral and political confusion regarding the fulfilment of social roles and the meaning of social usefulness– would the citizens decide to sentence to death the man who tried to make them better human beings. In democracy every citizen is an expert on everything, making them thus ignorant of everything. And ignorance was for both Plato and Socrates equal to immorality. The citizens' identity crisis⁶³ was simultaneously the outcome and the cause of this general moral and political retardation and they had therefore no moral and political criteria according to which they would be able to recognize what is just and good for themselves and the city. Thus, even if there was someone who had acquired the knowledge of what true justice is, the democratic masses could have never followed him.

What shall we say about those spectators, then, who can see a plurality of beautiful things, but not beauty itself, and who are incapable of following if someone else tries to lead them to it, and who can see many moral actions, but not morality itself, and so on? (*Republic*, 479e)

How then was this vicious circle to be broken, if possible at all? Socrates' recognition of this problem led him to pursue the discovery of the true nature of human excellence. His questions were concentrated toward defining virtues and then toward ways of acquiring them.⁶⁴ He wanted to find those universal standards which would make morality an objective matter of knowledge. Then, he would have to explore the possibility of applying these objective principles to real life in order to give the opportunity to his fellow citizens to live a moral, i.e. happy life. The Socratic question therefore was 'What is virtue and what can an individual do in order to get it?' Socrates, whose purpose was to attack the sophists' conventionalism in order to abolish subjectivism and relativism in moral matters and thus in political conduct, conceived

⁶³ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 111.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

virtue as the realization of human nature; the absolute fulfilment of our rational capacities and the consequent achievement of true happiness. Thus, the distinction between convention in the form of politics and philosophy led Socratic thinking to believe that virtue is something to be intellectually conquered and then practically applied: virtue was a matter of knowledge similar to the knowledge of nature's facts, whereas false beliefs –the basis of relativism and social conventions– were the outcome of ignorance and educational disorientation.

Socrates' major contribution therefore, according to Plato, would be the recognition that true moral virtue is something to be achieved only through objective theoretical knowledge and only as an end in itself, not as a means for something else. Plato follows Socrates' argument that virtue is knowledge and its corollary that moral conflict, weakness, and evil are due to ignorance.⁶⁵ However, what Socrates failed to do was to move from the inquiry of 'how one is individually to acquire and maintain virtue?' to 'how do we create the context and the foundations in order to achieve collectively justice?' His death, even if conceived as a deliberately failed argument, and the way he accepted it, was the proof that a comprehensive account of justice could not be achieved at both the private and the political level simultaneously. It signified, as a final political act, and as it is presented in the *Apology*, the contradiction between politics and morality and the potential results of attempting to reconcile them: it was meant as a unifying act, but it was also Socrates' decision for resignation. Eventually, it was an implicit but very strong admittance that the unity of private virtue and political justice seemed to be irrecoverable in real life.

This of course means that Socrates understood the nature of political imperatives very well. The arguments he employs to defend his position to his friend in the *Crito* do not depend solely on the importance of his private virtue. 'They have a public bearing, too, in that they reflect Socrates' conviction that Athenian politics expressed (usually false) belief, not knowledge, and that it is only through philosophical enquiry that such knowledge can be acquired.'⁶⁶ This argument means that Socrates' attitude in the *Apology* may not be taken as an absolute and blind moralism; the attitude of a saint who condemns everything social and commands resignation from collective activities for the sake of his soul. On the contrary, Socrates simply recognized the tension between real politics and an individually virtuous way of life, and without underestimating the significance of the former –he truly did fight throughout his life to the political and

⁶⁵ Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 29.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

moral betterment of Athens— he chose for the second, admitting that one cannot choose to live by the ideal standards of both. What he practically chose was his own final attempt to state the contradiction and persuade his fellow citizens that education is the only way out of this philosophical and political predicament.

It was Plato's task, therefore, to prove that in order to make politics and morality coincide it is not necessary for the philosopher to die as a political martyr. Socrates' death in particular should not necessarily mean philosophical defeat. Instead, Plato wanted to pose the problem as an inadequacy of political constitutions which necessarily resulted in moral confusion (most explicit in a democracy) that were responsible for this total separation between private virtue and political activity. In fear that the Athenian democracy would continue its disastrous action against true justice (collective and individual) —and that it will eventually transform into the worst possible form of government and way of life, tyranny— he tried to succeed where his teacher had failed: the philosopher should neither be allowed to resign from the immoral way of life of the polis nor die because of it. On the contrary, it was Plato's radical proposition in the *Republic*, that philosophers must become rulers in order to redefine the problematic relationship between politics and morality, i.e. to unify them. Thus, the individual should not be threatened by the collectivity, and vice versa. Of course, this is a comprehensive proposition which implies that in order to defeat moral relativism and fight against the abandonment of the absolute standards which Socrates died for,⁶⁷ he would have to change the manner in which humans beings learn, think and organize themselves in their pursuit of a happy life.

Plato's aim was to start from scratch and re-analyze how the philosophical foundations of ethical life can be complemented by political philosophy. Thus, the latter would not be contradictory to the former,⁶⁸ but necessary to it. Where for Socrates knowledge had proved to be the cause of death for the virtuous man, for Plato it was to be the solution to the problematic relationship between moral excellence and political activity. Or, in other words, if Socrates' attempt was to pose the insurmountable problem, Plato's attempt was to resolve it even if this meant the creation of a radically educational political edifice. This attempt was based upon the idea that if we cannot resolve the perpetual tension between private virtue and political activity, then the moral demands of the virtuous man and the imperatives of the *polis* should exist in a state of permanent imbalance. This means that human beings will

⁶⁷ T. J. Saunders, 'introduction' in Plato, *The Laws*, xxxii.

⁶⁸ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 68.

never realize their potential and achieve happiness. This is why 'In Plato we see a dramatic attempt to restore the unity which Socrates sees as irretrievably displaced.'⁶⁹ Socrates' tragic dilemma was either to withdraw from the world or die for it, in order to keep his virtue intact. Plato's radical solution to this dilemma is nothing less than the total transformation of society; a transformation in political, moral, educational, artistic and religious terms, which would make possible the creation of a constitution exactly opposite to the existing Athenian democracy. The *Politeia* should be the antidote to the unqualified moral and political conventionalism of Plato's contemporary society.

C) *Doing away with the plurality of social roles*

The introductory chapters of the *Republic* very vividly represent how distinctive figures within Athenian democracy conceived moral and political matters. They also illustrate that these conventional and ordinary views easily collapsed under reasonable criticism. Plato presents the opponents of Socrates as confused men whose arguments always end up to contradictions, especially when they have to propose solutions to the definition of justice in relation to political activity. Plato wanted to show that all these figures with their different views and mistaken answers to Socrates' questions symbolized in essence this vicious circle of bad political constitutions and corrupt morals. At the same time, Plato implicitly raised the question 'Who should be the experts in matters of morality?' and through his analogies gave the answer according to which it is the moral men who must tell us about virtue. Of course, since virtue is knowledge, the moral men cannot be anything else than true philosophers; and they, if anyone, really know the moral norms that society must obey as a whole.⁷⁰ At the end of Socrates' argument with Cephalus and Polemarchus Plato clearly advanced the radical proposition that moral men only can be experts in these matters, but also, and more importantly, that for them 'it is never right to harm anyone' (*Republic*, 335e).

Thus in a very concise manner we have seen both Plato's central claim and the paradox that he tried to resolve. If it is impossible for the moral person or the philosopher to do any harm, then it is also necessary for them to help morally ordinary people –because the idea of morality is unifying and so for those who have grasped it becomes necessary to realize it in both private and public spheres. This would mean that the philosophers should be compelled to rule, since by ruling they will help the

⁶⁹ Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 27-28.

⁷⁰ Saunders, *ibid.*, xxx.

people restore their virtue, as this is to be defined later on in the *Republic*. The question is, ‘if philosophers are compelled to rule how can they maintain their obligation never to harm anyone?’ when everybody ‘knows’ that politics is an activity that will always demand the violation of such inviolable principles? And in particular, how is it possible to initiate such radical moral change within a totally immoral community? The general idea behind resolving this apparent contradiction consists of two essential features of a state like *Politeia*: first, the few philosophers, or even the single philosopher, who really know the absolute moral standards should rule the many that do not; and second, that such control is willingly exercised and willingly accepted.⁷¹ Therefore, the constitution itself will not allow for a course of action by either the rulers or the ruled that would violate justice and allow morals and politics to come into contrast.

Since Plato’s initial moral claim reveals an absolute position it predisposes for a holistic political approach: in order for the moral persons to be able to rule –and thus impart their knowledge and promote justice breaking therefore the vicious circle– we will have to change society completely:

Plato’s object is the creation of a political society in which it is impossible for the just man to be treated unjustly. Philosophy must become sovereign if such a society is to come into existence [...] Both the aim and the method involve implications for our understanding of the relation between public and private. Socrates’ commitment to philosophy means a necessary tension between the private individual and public world. For some this is an essential feature of political morality; it constitutes its characteristic dilemmas and difficulties. But for Plato it is a tension which has to be overcome if philosophy is to have a place in the world and if that world is to be just.⁷²

In the *Republic*, Plato is hardly concerned with the detailed structure of society or with the minutiae of laws and regulations. The reasoning is simple but also absolute: if there are such men like Plato’s philosopher-kings, then their true knowledge should suffice to create a society that will ensure the moral fulfillment of its members. Of course the problem is to discover whether the existence of philosopher-kings is a realistic possibility. As mentioned previously, Plato may have been very well aware that his great scheme was a utopia in two senses. First, because of the epistemological assumption that there is an abstract ‘Form of Good’ to be discovered; and second the ontological assumption that, if there is such a ‘Form’, there will also be some men able

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 28.

to acquire it and that it is their purpose as human beings to use this knowledge for the betterment of their community. Both assumptions are philosophically very tentative and this may indicate that the *Republic* was an extreme statement of Plato's central ideas about the relationship between philosophy and politics as well as a critique against the Athenian democracy. His thoughts about real politics are to be found in other equally significant works,⁷³ like the *Crito* and the *Laws* where his theory of knowledge is absent altogether. Still, Plato had to make a convincing argument in favour of justice. Thus, he had first to demolish what was considered to be the dominant understanding of morality and its relation to politics at the time. Thrasymachus' twofold definition of morality (*Republic* 338c & 343c) seems to have been an invincible argument in the political reality of ancient Athens, and it seems to be equally strong until nowadays, in both its versions. Nevertheless, these two conceptions of how morality is related to politics constituted the main arguments that Plato had to defeat at least in theory. First,

[the] claim that morality is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger party...
(*Republic*, 338c)

and second,

'you don't even realize that morality and right are actually good for someone else –they are the advantage of the stronger party, the ruler– and bad for the underling at the receiving end of the orders. Nor do you realize that the opposite is true for immorality: the wrongdoer lords it over those moral simpletons while his subjects do what is to his advantage [...]
(*Republic*, 343c)

It has been suggested that Thrasymachus' first version of what morality truly is reveals an *amoralist* position, whereas the second-one shows a shift to an *immoralist* stance. According to the first *amoralist* position 'Justice merely reflects existing power distributions.'⁷⁴ Thus morality is nothing in itself; it is just a cultural and political construction. This *amoralism* is a form of extreme relativism which characterized the behaviour of many of Plato's intellectual enemies (the sophists) as well as many opportunist political figures (which would often be the students of the sophists) of the time. The relativity of moral values was also a central political view in Athenian democracy, as we have already seen. Plato, like Socrates, had to face the claim that

⁷³ Saunders, *ibid.*, xxx.

⁷⁴ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 87.

there are no ideal standards of conduct and, at best, morality and philosophy are irrelevant to politics. On the contrary, moral and political rules are always arbitrarily established in accordance to different kinds of social and individual interests.

Responding to such an extreme relativism is not an easy task. Plato's first response to Thrasymachus based on the analogy that medicine is for the benefit of the patients and not for that of their doctors, and so in the same manner ruling must be in the advantage of the people and not of the rulers, is just a preliminary way of saying that there is a specifically human virtue, which if exercised will lead to a state of well-being. Plato was aware that the argument is not very convincing in this preliminary form. Thus, in the rest of the *Republic* he will try to defend it and construct a convincing theory about the advantages of being virtuous both in individual and collective terms. Virtue, therefore, should not belong now to man's specific social function, but to his function as a man.⁷⁵ In other words, Plato wanted to argue, if we are to create a true moral society we should have to understand human excellence as something initially unrelated and abstracted from social functions, but also as something absolutely necessary for those functions to be fulfilled in the best possible manner. 'His ideal *politeia* emerges as a conscious, rational affirmation of what individual humans naturally bring to the collectivity [...] The Platonic "state" does not serve as an *external* point of reference for personal identity.'⁷⁶

Plato, nevertheless, should have been aware that this connection between well-being and virtue still seemed arbitrary and unconvincing against the *amoralist* argument. Thus not only the rest of the *Republic*, but most of his philosophical works constitute an attempt to remove this arbitrariness,⁷⁷ which as we have seen is the outcome of the epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge. Therefore, the quest for a true definition of justice mainly derives from the idea that it is political constitutions that should conform to human nature and not human nature to political conventions. The problem is then to define human nature and its potential for perfection (virtue) in objective and unchanging terms so as to attack moral relativism, which in turn is connected to political degeneration.⁷⁸ The essence of Plato's view was

⁷⁵ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 34.

⁷⁶ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 83.

⁷⁷ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 34.

⁷⁸ Of course, for ancient classical philosophers the most fundamental characteristic of human nature is the ability to use reason. This is why, as mentioned earlier, the virtuous conduct is strongly related to the 'rule of reason' and not to the 'rule of law' and this is why the *Republic's* definition of justice is beyond legal concerns (Plato makes the opposite case in the *Laws*): where perfect reason rules, legal justice becomes irrelevant. On the other hand, Plato, and also Aristotle as we are going to see in the next chapter, must have clearly understood the epistemological limitations in connecting man's rational

that society can never be reformed by gradual and conventional means, but only if it is governed according to stable and objective philosophic principles.⁷⁹ Plato did not want another list of actions which, at one time and place, could potentially be characterized as virtuous and at another time and place as immoral, because when people realized this they would eventually become amoral; the basic characteristic of the Athenian democracy. What he wanted to know was what it is about an action or a class of actions which leads us to call it just. 'He wants not a list of just actions, but a criterion for inclusion in or exclusion from such a list.'⁸⁰ From the moment he was persuaded that such a criterion exists, irrespective of its metaphysical and elusive nature, the ultimate purpose was clear: to make certain that the moral standards of the state reflected as much as possible these absolute criteria.⁸¹

The knowledge of these unchanging and universal criteria would work as a weapon against moral relativism and confusion and by consequence it would create a society where fulfilling different roles at the same time would not be acceptable. In addition, this knowledge would suffice against Thrasymachus' second view of morality, according to which even if there really were an ideal standard for virtuous conduct it would not be to the advantage of its practitioner but to the advantage of its non-practitioner. According to this view, justice (if it really exists) between two persons makes the person who performs justly vulnerable to exploitation and is therefore to the other's advantage, entailing thus 'that there is much more private profit in wrong than in right, and what's more, *everybody* knows this.'⁸² Amidst moral confusion, which is the natural outcome of democracy's pluralism, it is actually better to be immoral even if you know that you can be moral. But since Plato was certain that he discovered these criteria or ideal standards of morality, Thrasymachus' second, *immoralist* or realist,⁸³ position could not have possibly withstood his philosophical attack. Since virtue is knowledge the philosophers would impart this knowledge to the whole community; afterwards they would all realize that justice is truly in their interest. Therefore the criteria of knowledge (the ideal types or Forms) should be the same for both individuals and communities and they constitute the material upon which Plato's idea of justice would be built.

capacities with the possibility of creating a perfect political state. In other words they knew or suspected that perfect reason is a utopia. Thus, in final analysis, both of them, made an argument in favour of the 'rule of law' as the last refuge against the arbitrariness that all ontological arguments necessarily entail.

⁷⁹ Saunders, *ibid.*, xxviii.

⁸⁰ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 32.

⁸¹ Saunders, *ibid.*, xxviii.

⁸² Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol.1*, 88.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

This approach leaves of course no room for moral pluralism. Plato's argument is in principle holistic and its philosophical and political results absolute. The knowledge of these criteria is what makes some able to rule, i.e. able to educate the rest of their fellow citizens about what is good and what is bad.

Given that philosophers are those who are capable of apprehending that which is permanent and unvarying, while those who can't, those who wander erratically in the midst of plurality and variety, are not lovers of knowledge, which set of people ought to be rulers of a community? (*Republic*, 484b)

This is why the *Republic* is fundamentally an educational and an elitist work. Therefore, aside the unlikelihood of Plato's epistemological assumptions as explained earlier, there is also the problem that Plato's knowledge is only accessible to a few who will have to overcome the temptations of the isolated philosophic life and force themselves to rule for the good of the community. This entails a paradox, because by doing this, the philosophers will endanger both their virtuous characters and their lives: why should they decide to endanger their individual virtue in order to promote collective virtue when they know this is very unlikely to happen? This is nevertheless the necessary course of action toward unifying morality and politics according to Plato. An additional paradox derives from the fact that Plato was aware that the moral man will rarely exist except in the just state, because he never believed that human character can be perfected in defiance of environment.⁸⁴ But on the other hand, the just state cannot possibly exist except where there are just men,⁸⁵ confirming thus the vicious circle between morality and politics and the view that the *Republic* was conceived as a utopian state to be used as a standard for assessing real political constitutions.

In order to make certain that philosophers did not abstain from politics, Plato had to produce a definition of morality that would not give them the possibility of such a choice. True knowledge should dictate that morality, or justice, is a matter of everyone knowing their place and function, so as to make it possible to achieve excellence in their allocated roles and only there. The argument thus simply follows on the definition of human virtue as fulfilling one's natural potential and then sticking to it. Each person has a single talent and a single way of contributing towards the welfare of the whole community; thus, they all should perform that function, and that function alone (without interfering in the domains of others), throughout their lives. 'This is not argued for: it is

⁸⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁸⁵ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 39.

taken to be self-evident, and made into an axiom.’⁸⁶ Eradicating people’s tendency to fulfil a plurality of social roles is essential for their virtue. Justice would be achieved if the philosopher made certain that individuals would not be absorbed into competing roles, because Plato knows that social roles cultivate morality; and competing social roles promote moral disintegration, first within one’s soul and then within the community as a whole. The moral consistency Socrates so much craved for, i.e. virtue in both the private and public spheres of human action, is thus something impossible for an individual with a crisis of moral identity (see the democratic moral character). Reason means integrity in argument and action and, paradoxically, despite the idea that ‘virtue should not belong now to man’s specific social function, but to his function as a man’, what reason commands is for everyone to express their virtue by staying within their predetermined social roles. This oxymoron is the necessary result of the analogy between the soul and the state. Thus, virtue as a theoretical concept may be unrelated and abstracted from social functions, but justice realized collectively requires obedience to the philosophic elite. The moral integrity of the people as a whole acquires therefore a different meaning in comparison to moral integrity for the individual wise person. That is, it is no longer based on reasonable argument, but on reasonable obedience.

Thus, men would fall into three classes depending upon which part of the soul is dominant: reason, spirit and appetite; but in the end all people can be moral if they stay in their predetermined roles and try to fulfil them in the best possible manner. This is especially important regarding the philosophers-guardians of the community, because their function in the community is so crucial that no rival role or responsibility can be allowed to interfere with its performance. Eliminating all competing roles and becoming exclusively identified with the role of the procurer of the public good is the only way to be certain that private interest (even if this is identified with living the isolated contemplative life) will not conflict with public benefit.⁸⁷ For Plato, this is not merely a way to have a good ruler who is also a good man, but it is the only way to answer the timeless question: how ‘to be a human self?’⁸⁸ Preserving one’s moral self-integrity can only be achieved if we stop posing contradictory demands to it. The ruler’s purpose as a human being is to rule well, i.e. promoting the interests of the community as a whole, because only the ruler has the ‘power of seeing things as a

⁸⁶ Robin Waterfield, ‘introduction’ in Plato, *The Republic*, xxii.

⁸⁷ Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics*, 38.

⁸⁸ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 83.

whole.’⁸⁹ Thus, it is not wise for us either to demand or let this human being get absorbed into several other social or private occupations.

Since justice should be comprehensive, the ‘one man, one job principle’ is not restricted to just one class within the ideal community. Self-discipline, the main constitutive quality of justice that was essentially lacking from the Athenian democracy, is a quality that must permeate all classes. Inner morality is defined as the rule of reason over the other parts of the soul and this would mean that the third class of the community be capable of morality (definable in the same terms as philosophic morality), by accepting philosophers as their rulers and staying within their allocated roles. This is still morality; it is not as deep or thorough as philosophic morality, but it reflects an ordinary virtue based on true belief; the highest form of knowledge the non-philosophers can achieve, after they have been guided by their rulers.⁹⁰ The structure of the community reflects therefore the structure of the soul, but also, and most importantly, it reflects its state, i.e. if the structure is balanced then unity and harmony is achieved, whereas if the structure is unbalanced we have injustice and unhappiness.

From the outset, when we first started to found the community, there’s a principle we established as a universal requirement –and this, or some version of it, is in my opinion morality. The principle we established, and then repeated time and again, as you’ll remember, is that every individual has to do just one of the jobs relevant to the community, the one for which his nature has best equipped him [...] Furthermore, the idea that morality is doing one’s job and not intruding elsewhere is commonly voiced [...] (*Republic*, 433a)

In the light of Plato’s conception of justice it is only natural to see democracy and its consequent moral pluralism or relativism as the outcome of a seriously unbalanced moral character: if a man can be either led only by reason or only by appetite or, in other words, by his soul or his body⁹¹ democracy definitely reflects the second ignoble category. However, in the analogy of the *Republic* this principle of specialization makes sure that both individually and collectively only Reason is to be followed. Self-discipline is the way to fight the appetite for participating in more than one social role. This would not only make impossible achieving virtue by fulfilling one’s true nature, but it would also create confusion and disunity i.e. injustice, both in one’s soul and his community. Of course, there is a collateral cost when our explanation moves from the

⁸⁹ Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, 297.

⁹⁰ Waterfield, *ibid.*, xxvi.

⁹¹ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 75.

individual to the polis or from the philosophical to the political. If it is quite self-evident for one to follow his own reason when true knowledge has been acquired, it is not self-evident at all why one class should follow another in collective terms when such knowledge is not available beforehand. This problem, for Plato, constitutes a real test for the moral character of the philosophers-rulers, since we accepted their hypothetical existence. The Guardians will have to persuade the rest of the community to follow them, but the only way to do such a thing amongst immoral men would be to lie to them.

God included gold in the mixture when he was forming those of you who have what it takes to be rulers (which is why the rulers have the greatest privileges), silver when he was forming the auxiliaries, and iron and copper when he was forming the farmers and other workers. (*Republic*, 415a)

The ‘Myth of the Metals’ is Plato’s central example of how the rulers’ special moral permissions should be actually seen as moral responsibilities for the overall good of the community. His claim is essentially that those who have true knowledge, those who have seen beauty itself cannot really violate morality, because their knowledge actually constitutes morality. Thus, the lie is not simply propaganda made in the interest of some ignorant politicians –as in the case of democracy where the demagogues are in the end being deceived by their own lies. This, instead, is a ‘Noble Lie’ which should not be considered a violation of morality. It is to be considered as the proof that the philosophers-rulers do indeed fulfil their moral obligation toward transforming society. They cannot choose not to take the moral responsibility for what is seemingly an immoral course of action and, when they realize that, this course of action ceases to be immoral. Staying out of the ‘Cave’, although tempting for the philosophers, is against Plato’s definition of virtue and against the principle of specialization as the application of justice. Going into the ‘Cave’ is the only way for the philosophers to achieve moral completion even if this means that they will have temporarily to re-adjust to the ways of its immoral inhabitants.

Our job as founders of the community, then, is to make sure that the best people come to that fundamental field of study: we must have them make the ascent we’ve been talking about and see goodness. And afterwards, once they’ve been up there and had a good look, we mustn’t let them get away with what they do at the moment [...] Staying there and refusing to come back down again to the prisoners [...] (*Republic*, 519)

It is of course still another paradox that even in Plato's reasoning morality and politics will be unified only if we allow for an 'innocent' violation of morality. This may be a hint that Plato understood virtue dialectically and not simply as pure innocence. That is, virtue cannot be achieved by avoiding all moral conflicts or difficulties so as to keep the moral character intact. Instead virtue is the outcome of engaging with the conflicts, understanding them philosophically and then overcoming them. Such a conflict is the Socratic contradiction revealed between his arguments made in the *Apology* and the *Crito*. In other words, the philosophers must have grasped what the realities of life are and they must be ready to risk their lives in order to overcome them. The reluctance to tell the lie is the ultimate lesson on what the relation between politics and morality really rests. The philosopher-king owes it to society that has so trained his natural talents that he now can combine philosophy and politics in its service. 'Such a man will not refuse this just demand on his educated talents. It is, however a demand, and therefore a constraint. But it is one that is much in the interests of the philosopher as in those whom he rules. The trained philosophic nature would prefer the pleasure of living a life of contemplation. But his self-interest lies elsewhere –in ruling',⁹² even if this temporarily means that he will have to violate the moral demands of his private virtue.

Therefore, the solution to the problem of political morality is for Plato self-evident exactly because of the philosophers' characteristic reluctance to rule which makes them incorruptible by politics. Those who do not really want to rule should be more resisting to the temptations of power when they actually come to rule and they will have the necessary iron will to use politics in order to transform and re-educate the polis. This is essentially the answer to Thrasymachus' immoralist position according to which political power is pursued for the personal advantage it brings back to those who hold it over others. For the virtuous man, on the contrary, there is no interest in political power because there is no interest in taking personal advantage over others –seeing beauty itself is likely all the virtuous man will ever need in order to be complete and happy. Only when someone becomes wise enough to understand this truth can in fact be trusted to rule in such a manner that he pursues, not his own advantage, but the advantage of those he rules.⁹³ If the initial seemingly immoral action is for the sake of

⁹² Ibid., 110.

⁹³ Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics*, 35.

the community, it is not really an immoral action.⁹⁴ For Plato, the 'Noble Lie' is not another instantiation of morally disputed conduct in politics. For the philosophers-kings there cannot be morally disputed action because they have true knowledge. When they lie, they are not taking political chances by exercising practical wisdom; instead they construct the just polis based on the unquestionable perfection of the 'Forms'. Their goal is justice, because they know what justice is.

D) The merging of politics and morality: a philosophical experiment

The *Republic* was essentially an illustration of Plato's experimentation with the idea that we can have an elitist group of people with some very particular characteristics which would allow them to conduct politics in a just manner and never be corrupted by it. His moral ideal is that 'of rationalists who look to the aristocratic dominance of reason to impose stability in the soul, in parallel with the dominance of an intellectual elite who will impose stability in society through a proper subordination of an unenlightened lower class'.⁹⁵ Their true knowledge of what is the good would allow them to have a set of special moral permissions which at the same time were special moral responsibilities in order to realize their enlightened leadership. Philosophers have access to something the rest of us do not: that which enables true identification in all important cases.⁹⁶ What seem to be like contradictions and paradoxes to other peoples' minds are simply clear images of what is and should be done in the philosophers' minds. This is why there is no need for them to share responsibility for their radical actions with the rest of the community: only they know what to do, thus only they should take political responsibility. The analogy of the philosophic guardian to a dog is revealing of the image Plato had in mind for the 'untouchable' leaders of this ideal community.

⁹⁴ The oxymoron is again resolved due to Plato's metaphysical understanding of the relationship between knowledge and morality i.e. there can be neither practical nor theoretical contradictions when one has acquired holistic knowledge. Still the political implications of such a justification of violating morality are significant. Plato seems to argue that immorality is strongly connected to a concept of constant immoral political decisions. The initial socially transformative immoral act can be justified if only done once, and this with great reluctance. Any further perseverance on immoral means as a way of promoting the community's interests would seem as a self-cancelling strategy for the truly virtuous men. Plato is here facing philosophical difficulties because on the one hand he wants to reject the Thrasymachean 'the ends justify the means' but, on the other, it seems this reasoning is the only way to start the social transformation which would allow the philosophers to rule.

⁹⁵ Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 181.

⁹⁶ Waterfield, *ibid.*, lii.

Where are we going to find a character that is simultaneously gentle and high-spirited, when gentles and passion are opposites? [...] We seem to be faced with an impasse; it turns out that a good guardian is an impossibility. (*Republic*, 375c)

The impasse Socrates is referring to is nothing else than the seemingly irreconcilable tension between public benefit and private virtue. For Plato, if we managed to reconcile those contradictory characteristics in a man's soul –like he did with his philosophers-kings– we could also reconcile politics and morality. The definition of justice, the principle of specialization, is a state of collective existence which would make this reconciliation possible. However, in accordance to Plato's philosophy his conception of justice is already an axiom. It is not related to the social process which constitutes its basis, in final analysis. This process is his theory of how to acquire knowledge and his conception of collective education; but in the *Republic* the end of this knowledge is already given, metaphysically. The private and the political imperatives have been reconciled in the *Politeia* as the different psychological forces have been reconciled in the soul: self-discipline meant no conflict; no conflict meant unity; and unity meant happiness. Nevertheless, the cost of this reconciliation at the collective level, as Plato probably recognized, was too great to be acceptable. His account of social education has been repeatedly criticized as being too monolithic to allow for a plurality of moral experience.

Anything which tells against the rule of reason in morality and politics is an object of suspicion [...] Literature encourages us to see moral conflict from the point of view of the participants [...] Their moral position is not an inadequate version of a deeper reality but an expression of personal character and identity. Plato's insistent rationalism neglects this.⁹⁷

This traditional criticism against Plato's philosophy is undoubtedly useful. However, it disregards the case according to which the *Republic* was only conceived as a philosophical experiment and not meant as a literal attempt to change human societies. It might be better to think of it as a perfect reflection of a metaphysical image in Plato's mind. The *Politeia* must be perfect in all the ways in which things of this world are deficient –it should be eternally and unvaryingly what it should be. This is what makes it an object of knowledge. 'If it were flatly impossible to have knowledge of this world

⁹⁷ Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 31.

just because it is this world, then philosophers, would be no better at ruling than anyone else, and the whole point of Plato's enquiry into knowledge would collapse.'⁹⁸

Moral pluralism was for Plato necessarily translated into moral relativism and whether this relativism meant an *amoralist* or realist (see Thrasymachus' arguments) view of politics made no difference. Both were conducive to unhappiness. This moral pluralism was both the obvious outcome and the basis of the democratic mindset which would like to have a word on everything. This means that the democratic argument is always deficient because there never is any expertise to support it. Therefore, this image of the Athenian distorted morality derived from a confusion of individual, political and, generally, social roles. This kind of morality was impossible to be theorized and systematized. Thus it could only be wrong as a foundation for a sound political and ethical theory. 'It seems likely that Plato would more or less equate knowledge of a thing's goodness with knowledge of its function [...] Therefore, there is no gap in theory between knowledge of goodness and knowing a person's function in society.'⁹⁹ True morality can and should be theorized even if this had as a consequence an absolute social structure. Individual virtue can only be reconciled with collective virtue if they are both conceived as necessary to each other.

The gap between private and public, the idea that there can be an ethic of one which the other lacks, is for Plato a source of political strife and an inconsistency not to be tolerated in a rational political community.¹⁰⁰

In the meantime, all the apparent practical contradictions and moral paradoxes that arise from this concept, at both the individual and the collective level, are resolved because of true knowledge. Knowledge, which in Plato's case is based on a metaphysical concept, is the unifying agent in this attempt to illustrate morality and politics as strong allies to achieving human happiness. The other unfortunate fact, probably also recognized by Plato himself, is that absolute knowledge can only be translated into absolute attitudes. Thus, there is a very thin line that separates the tyrant from the true philosopher-king, and it might not be wise to rely on the existence of the 'Forms' if we wish to make this distinction.

⁹⁸ Waterfield, *ibid.*, 1.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, liv.

¹⁰⁰ Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 30.

2. Happiness Requires Politics: Aristotle's Social Conception of Virtue

A) Virtue as practical activity

Aristotle shares with both Socrates and Plato several ancient Greek assumptions in relation to the study of ethics and politics. Mainly, he shares the notion that the ultimate end of a happy or a good life presupposes a moral perfectionism which is not fundamentally different as an ultimate aim from Plato's. They both think of politics while aiming at a universally acceptable account of well-being. Their common end is an objective definition of happiness and the context within which this is achievable is the *polis*. Virtue, or moral excellence, is a prerequisite of happiness, in Aristotle's case, or it is happiness itself, in Plato's case. The good life is identified with a harmony between the different forces within the human soul, a harmony which is equalled to morality, as we have seen in the *Republic*, or the capacity to become virtuous in Aristotle's theory. However, despite their similar aim, i.e. an objective idea of the good life, Aristotle and Plato differ in their conception of how we come to understand morality and in their conception of the purpose of politics or of the frameset within which humans can achieve moral perfection. Thus, the nature of the interrelationship of politics and ethics is heavily determined by each thinker's theory of knowledge that entails specific understandings of human nature, which in turn requires a specific political organization in order for human nature to flourish. Aristotle and Plato's epistemologies reflect their different estimations of human capacities. Such epistemologies also reflect their own psychological dispositions toward the future of the human species –as we have already seen, Plato was obviously pessimistic about this. Thus, the good life may be identified with happiness and virtue within the just political community, but how we get to this stage of existence and organization and how we maintain it, if at all possible, is a source of great disagreement between Plato and Aristotle. This is because Plato's conclusion is that happiness, virtue and political justice are essentially the same thing, irrespective of the possibility of ever achieving it; whereas for Aristotle *eudaimonia* is not the same as virtue or political justice and it is more difficult to achieve than the latter.

Aristotle's two major works, apropos of the relationship between politics and ethics, were the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which shows us what form and style of life are necessary toward happiness (*eudaimonia*) or the good life, and the *Politics*, wherein he

analyses what particular constitution, what set of institutions, are necessary to make this form possible, while safeguarding it.¹⁰¹ There is an intention, in Aristotle's political philosophy as a whole, to unify politics and ethics following the example which Plato set, but there is also, clearly, some hesitation from his part regarding how far this unification should be pursued for. This unity is a presupposition for the achievement of happiness but its existence depends now on different concepts than it did in Plato's unitary account of knowledge. In the *Republic* the unity of virtues was a matter of proving that there was a single and unchanging principle that should determine all action in a coherent manner. This abstract principle could only be acquired philosophically and it was this principle which dictated that an individual or a community could acquire all the virtues at once, in the form of perfect knowledge, or none at all. For Aristotle, the unity of virtues (which again mainly refers to the reconciliation of private and public virtue) was a matter of proving that all human activities are interrelated in a complex manner, but nevertheless aiming at an objective end which is determined by nature. This objective end becomes understandable and realizable by inferring knowledge from experience and sensual perception. This inductive method based on experience implies the acceptance, in principle, of the fact that there are limits on the capacity of humans to acquire perfect knowledge; something that has as ramifications the possibility of a perfectly consistent relationship between politics and morality. There are therefore two basic reasons why Aristotle's account of the unity of ethics and politics should follow that of Plato's: first, because we already have a major thesis in favour of that possibility in philosophy –but against it in real life. Second, because Aristotle, although heavily influenced by Plato in other respects, is trying to overcome his pessimistic absolutism.

The outcome of Aristotle's attempt is possibly an insuperable to this day realistic account of rationalism in practical activity.¹⁰² Partly because Aristotle's thought is so remote from modern politics and knowledge and partly because of his critical relationship with Plato's own thought, Aristotle seemed to have developed a clearer view of the reasonableness of practical reason and of the proper language of moral argument than any succeeding philosopher.¹⁰³ 'Aristotle recognised that deliberation about practical possibilities is the primary form of moral thought from which the primary form of moral judgment emerges: namely, the judgment that of all

¹⁰¹ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 54.

¹⁰² Julia Annas, 'Classical Greek Philosophy', in John Boardman, Jasper Griffin & Oswyn Murray (eds.), *The Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (2001), 302.

¹⁰³ Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 17.

the possibilities that are open, the best action to take, all things considered, is so and so'.¹⁰⁴ Still, as we are going to see further down, Aristotle's account is also limited by the same preconceptions which made Plato's thought seem sometimes unrealistic.

Aristotle's philosophy sets the purpose or the end of man as the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, which is achieved through the exercise of our human qualities endowed by nature; and the most prominent of those qualities –again following the Socratic tradition– is man's rational powers. Thus, the exercise of the human capacity to reason can lead to the good life, human excellence and man's happiness, which is the ultimate good since it is self-sufficient and not a means to anything else. Ethics, as Aristotle conceives of it, is a practical investigation that aims not merely at theoretical knowledge but at personal change, that is, there is a practical end: the purpose is not simply to know what virtue is, but to become good, i.e., actually to live the *eudaimon* life.¹⁰⁵ Here he breaks off from the Socratic axiom that virtue is knowledge. Knowing that there is a concept of 'good' does not necessarily entail being good. The crucial part in Aristotle's syllogism is that this peculiarly human capacity for rational thought has to be exercised continuously otherwise it cannot, naturally, be realized. This is why *eudaimonia* is not the same as virtue or justice (contra Plato): virtue is a continuous activity; justice is the political consequence of virtue and *eudaimonia* is the overall outcome of both, given that some other external factors –not controlled by the moral agents–need to be fulfilled.

Moral perfection is not thus the end of a theoretical rediscovery of first principles that were lost amidst the ongoing moral decadence and confusion of the human species. Instead, human excellence is the outcome of a practical activity in accordance with this peculiar human capacity for reason. The problem, obviously, is to show how humans can initiate the process which leads to practical reasoning. In other words, since the simplicity of abstract concepts had led to an impossible metaphysical, i.e. separated from reality, understanding of morality, Aristotle had to develop a different epistemology. An epistemology which would firstly make the universal or abstract, and the particular or practical, coincide and which would secondly offer a convincing explanation as to which one should develop first. His argument was extremely simple: we have to use our given capacities to reason in order to infer knowledge from our experience. However, this experience can only be social because it

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰⁵ C. D. C. Reeve, *Practices of Reason: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford (1992), 22.

is Aristotle's ontological assumption that human beings are social animals; they need to communicate in order to develop an understanding of their selves as moral agents and they need to participate in community's affairs in order to flourish as individuals. The philosophical argument is thus completed by the political argument according to which the natural field of the exercise of virtue is the political community. Politics is the place where the coincidence of the universal and the particular is possible because it is at the same time the natural expression of the human peculiar capacity to reason and the outcome of knowledge as it has been inferred from human experience.

If virtue is theoretical knowledge, like Socrates and Plato suggested, then according to an account which conceives true knowledge as abstract and never-changing, a reflection of pure rationality, the particular must be determined by the universal because true knowledge can only be universal. In Plato's conception the universal is represented by the wise individual, who has captured the 'Form of Goodness'; and the particular by the community, which must follow the wise individual. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this is how Plato conceives the prioritization of private and political virtue before he offers his radical solution. Thus, the concurrence of the universal and the particular is easily achieved in theory because the particular is deducted from and thus defined by the intellectually conquered universal. This Socratic notion required that human reason can be perfected in order to discover the universal without external help. External resources are irrelevant to pure knowledge insofar humans are able to suppress the non-rational parts of their souls (the parts which are heavily influenced by materialistic needs, i.e. passions, basic instincts, etc.). When the rational part dominates the non-rational part of the soul pure knowledge is possible, and pure knowledge automatically reveals the true nature of morality, which is not *ethos* (habit based on practical activity) but knowledge. Acquiring perfect and unitary knowledge also means that morality and politics should no longer be separated; instead they merge into one principle that reflects the abstract and universal perfect Form. When the perfect Form is discovered it will change political reality into unchanging perfection (*dikaiosune*). Of course, as already explained, the epistemological problem of Plato's theory is whether there is a perfect Form to be known in the first place. Then the ontological problem follows as to whether it is possible for some men to acquire the Form only by intellectual means and whether this should be their only purpose in life.

Crucially, Aristotle was not ready to transcend –even experimentally– the limits of human rationality because he was very well aware that those limits were posed by

our own nature, and practical solutions require that we work in accordance with our own nature, not against it (like Socrates suggested in the *Apology*). Thus developing an ethical theory which would not be practical would be pointless. Therefore, external resources *are* indeed necessary because they fulfil human natural needs –otherwise Platonic rationalism is closer to the divine or metaphysical than Plato was ready to admit. Human needs should be a formative element in our way to human excellence, not an obstacle to it. But in order for this to happen, human needs must be cultivated in such a manner so as to constitute a correct basis for human reason to flourish. It is therefore the necessity of these external resources that now separate *eudaimonia* from the practice of virtue and make it more difficult to achieve than the latter. For Aristotle, it is not certain that the virtuous man will eventually live the happy life because external factors can be an obstacle to this. Still, moral perfection was considered possible for him, at least in the sense in which Plato considered it possible, i.e. under ideal circumstances.

Given Aristotle's view about the necessity of including imperfect human nature in the moral and political equation, the alternative to explaining virtue not as theoretical knowledge but as a practical activity was obvious. Thus, virtue, and consequently happiness, cannot be possessed once and for all; it must be realized and exercised throughout one's life. This makes the unity of politics and ethics a constant aim for the members of a community as a whole; but it is a unity which nevertheless comes about naturally under the right circumstances and correct guidance. On the other hand, if, according to Plato, virtue is knowledge, it lies in the philosopher's will to go back into the Cave and realize it. This is the only practical expression of the unification of morality and politics in his theory and Plato was at pains to persuade his audience about the necessity of this unification or, in other words, the necessity of politics for the philosopher: why should someone who acquired true knowledge and achieved moral perfection care for the realization of collective happiness, especially when this latter process posed a fatal threat to this happiness? The philosopher had to go back into the Cave because a unitary explanation of morality cannot exclude the collective; for Plato to give different explanations for morality and justice would be to reject his own theory of knowledge: thus, the *polis* had to be morally saved even if its salvation meant endangering individual virtue. The philosopher's purpose is to overcome his anger or indifference for the moral decadence of his community and behave as he should in order to protect the unity of virtue and political justice.

Nevertheless this process seems to refer more to a soteriological doctrine, than to a philosophy which conceives the interdependence of politics and morality as a natural phenomenon. Collective morality was a compulsory aim dictated by the metaphysical unitary 'Form of the Good'. Plato realized that it might be possible to acquire individual happiness (based on the Socratic case) and he attempted to offer justification for spreading this happiness to the community even against the will of its members. He never managed actually to find one that was not separated from reality and this meant that philosophy and social practice would remain irreconcilable in a similar manner that perfect individual virtue and politics were irreconcilable. Aristotle rejected Plato's –in essence– pessimistic absolutism. If the *polis* should remain the normative matrix for evaluative moral criteria, then politics should be a formative element of morality, not a necessary evil for it. Thus, conceiving virtue as activity makes the unification of politics and ethics seem as the natural outcome of the natural way of living, which is nothing else than the political way. So, if according to Plato the realization of collective happiness was a necessary evil –in the form of politics– for the philosopher, for Aristotle politics is the necessary presupposition for its realization in the first place.

The point is that if we begin by asking for an account of goodness which is compatible with the good man suffering any degree of torture and injustice, the whole perspective of our ethics will be different from that of an ethics which begins from asking in what form of life doing well and faring well may be found together. The first perspective will end up with an ethics which is irrelevant to the task of creating such a form of life. Our choice between these two perspectives is the choice between an ethics which is engaged in telling us how to endure a society in which the just man is crucified and an ethics which is concerned with how to create a society in which this no longer happens.¹⁰⁶

B) Practical and theoretical reason

Aristotle's academic background, with extensive studies in biology and 'ancient physics', shaped his thought towards recognizing nature's variety of expressions. Thus, human life was naturally part of this variety and it was variable itself. It is because of this background that he quickly understood virtue as a practical and continuous activity which will have to be formed amidst the contingencies and predicaments of life. This does not mean that he considered universal moral explanations impossible or that he

¹⁰⁶ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 58.

gave absolute priority to politics over philosophy (against Plato). Moral conflict was still a philosophical problem that needed resolution. However, Aristotle understood that extreme unification under abstract principles is not the solution to this conflict (a view which was then translated into his political doctrine against extremities). Thus, he always strives for the appropriate level of generality which will illuminate without oversimplifying. Aristotle's theory of knowledge dictates that we use the method of induction in order to acquire first principles: we need to use particulars in order to generalize, not use generalizations in order to find particulars. Obviously, for Aristotle, starting with generalizations would oversimplify the plurality of life in this world and especially the complexity of human experience.

The natural outcome of this methodology was a fierce attack on Plato's idea of the Forms.¹⁰⁷ According to Aristotle, Plato cannot account for the diversity of the uses of *good*, because to speak of the good 'itself' or 'as such' does not clearly add anything to *good*.¹⁰⁸ Plato had represented *goodness* as a common property imbedded in the structure of reality and open to our study and contemplation. For Aristotle, this theory left no sufficient place for the distinction between theoretical and practical reason, between thinking about actualities and thinking about possibilities.¹⁰⁹ *Goodness*, therefore, separated from the world we experience and existing independently of it, is useless. 'It is crucial that we do have understanding of the world; a theory must be wrong that cuts us off from what is supposed to make the world intelligible.'¹¹⁰

So there could not be some common Form over and above these goods. Again, good is spoken of in as many senses as is being: it is used in the category of substance, as for instance god and intellect, in that of quality – the virtues, in that of quantity – the right amount, in that of relation – the useful, in that of time – the right moment, and in that of place – the right locality, and so on. So it is clear that there could not be one common universal, because it would be spoken of not in all the categories, but in only one. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1196a)

So, if it is not wise to seek a unitary principle in order to resolve moral conflict and confusion (which seemed the obvious thing to do), how should virtue be conceived of? For Aristotle, in reality there are many kinds and levels of explanation, and they do not exclude one another. Philosophy should try to understand and rationalize this

¹⁰⁷ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 120-121.

¹⁰⁸ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 59.

¹⁰⁹ Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 19.

¹¹⁰ Annas, 'Classical Greek Philosophy', 300.

complex material and come up with an analysis about how we can achieve better consistency and avoid conflict which is the outcome of our misperception of the phenomena.¹¹¹ This variety of phenomena is especially striking within human societies. For this reason ethics cannot be an exact science like it was conceived to be by Plato who thought of science as knowledge of the unchanging universals. Thus, 'Plato was misled when he assumed that all predications of good must refer to a common quality and that they must be governed by a common criterion'.¹¹² Instead, the study of ethics and politics deals with individual cases and it aims at deeds rather than the necessary demonstrable truth; that is why Aristotle is against deduction in moral matters and understands virtue as a predicate which defines an active life as a whole. Ethics and politics should be used in order to help us explain the complex nature of human behaviour and offer solutions in favour of happiness and stability respectively. However, the source of these solutions cannot be sought into the metaphysical realm and it is not a unitary principle; instead it is to be found in the experience we acquire from real political communities which are the outcome of human language and thought, hence their complexity.¹¹³

The *good* is then defined in terms of the human specific characteristics as these are recognized after extensive research and collection of data. Human beings have a specific nature which can be studied and explained; and if this is done correctly it will reveal us what is the purpose that nature urges us to fulfil. Aristotle's explanation is therefore teleological, which means that the dictations of our nature are towards a specific *telos*. This *telos* can only be identified with happiness because happiness is a state of self-sufficiency and it cannot be a means to something else; it is the end of human development, the equivalent of Plato's *dikaiosune*. This teleology is Aristotle's own means toward reconciling what Plato failed to reconcile with his austere programme of education, which sometimes seems to disregard the limited human capacities to reason. The *good* in Aristotle's theory is grounded on an understanding of human societies inferred from his biological studies. It seems easier in this way to make the universal and the particular coincide, because an account of the good which derives from a philosophical naturalism can be at once local and particular –because the *polis* is the natural end of collective life and thus a prerequisite of happiness– and yet cosmic and universal –because it has been teleologically defined in terms of the

¹¹¹ Ibid., 298-299.

¹¹² Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 24.

¹¹³ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 123-124.

invariable characteristics of a whole species.¹¹⁴ We have thus a universal, fixed and necessary definition of man according to his capacities as those are endowed to him by nature; not against it like in Plato's account. We also have the particular moral agent with a character that will fulfil these capacities up to certain but variable degree depending upon the cultivation of these capacities.¹¹⁵ This cultivation greatly relies on the political context within which the moral agent is being active.

The outcome of this approach is an account of reason in ethics which is more intricate than Plato's and avoids the worst consequences of its extreme rationalism.¹¹⁶ The aim is to make possible for nature's forces and human rationalism to work synergistically. If this be possible, then the interrelation of moral confusion and political decadence (that influenced so much Plato's political philosophy) can be explained and overcome in a different and more realistic way. Still, this view resolves a major problem but it creates another one; because even if pure rationalism may not be a realistic aspiration for mortal beings, a rationalism which is severely dependent on our nature may not leave enough margins for any aspirations toward moral perfectionism. Aristotle therefore thought of a third element which would work as the catalyst in the relation between human rationalism and the natural limits imposed upon it. This third element is habit or *ethos* and is supposed to reconcile the tension which is depicted in the strong Platonic division between 'soul and body' or reason and passion. The harmony of virtues can thus only be achieved when nature, intellect and habit all work toward the common aim, which has been previously teleologically determined. But given that nature is stable and we cannot do much to change it—we can only fulfil it—it remains that we need to cultivate our intellect and our character; the first by teaching and the second by correct habituation.

Virtue, then, is of two kinds: that of the intellect and that of character. Intellectual virtue owes its origin and development mainly to teaching, for which reason its attainment requires experience and time; virtue of character (*ēthos*) is a result of habituation (*ethos*), for which reason it has acquired its name through a small variation of 'ethos'. From this it is clear that none of the virtues of character arises in us by nature. For nothing natural can be made behave differently by habituation [...] Virtues, however, we acquire by first exercising them [...] What happens in cities bears this out as well, because legislators make the citizens good by habituating them, and this is what every legislator intends. Those who

¹¹⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Duckworth, London (2007), 148.

¹¹⁵ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 141.

¹¹⁶ Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 35.

do not do it well miss their target; and it is in this respect that a good political system differs from a bad one. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a-1103b)

This is how Aristotle conceives the distinction between theoretical and practical reason; the former exercised in the contemplative realms of philosophy and theory and the latter in the practical activities of ethics and politics. Since virtue has to be exercised in order to be realized it follows that virtue has an aspect which is not intellectual, but is, as it were, a feature of character.¹¹⁷ The distinction between moral and intellectual virtue reflects the distinction between the non-rational and rational parts of the soul. It also reflects Aristotle's fundamental dualist understanding of human nature, which was of course also present in Plato's philosophy. The irreconcilability between politics and morality in Plato's thought was mostly the outcome of the dualist conception of the human soul; it might have been possible to overcome it in an individual, but it was a utopian demand for a political society as a whole: the question of how we can persuade the unwise community to accept reason as their ruler proved to be unanswerable in practice. Reasonable obedience in the form of self-discipline seems similar to blind obedience if one's soul is not guided by pure reason. In other words, apart from the philosopher-kings no one really understands the ultimate purpose of self-discipline. Aristotle attempted to overcome this problem by developing a less sharp distinction between the rational and the non-rational part of the human soul which would make the transition from individual to political virtue not a leap of logic but a natural necessity.

Therefore, the non-rational part has now more in common with the rational part, and is capable of both opposing it and obeying it.¹¹⁸ Thus, the non-rational part has been given the capacity by nature to coincide with the rational part. It is not necessary to be suppressed by it (like in Plato's account), but it is necessary to be cultivated toward it, and the most effective manner to cultivate it is to do it collectively because society is the mirror which guides human agency. The purely rational part is thus related to intellectual virtues; and the second non-rational part, which is nevertheless also perfectible, is related to moral virtues, or virtues of character. In this way there is no necessary conflict between reason and desire, such as Plato envisages, although Aristotle is fully aware of the possibility of such conflicts; besides this is the why,

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 35.

¹¹⁸ Roger Crisp, 'introduction' in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, xiv.

according to him, we engage in ethical inquiries.¹¹⁹ For him, desire can be cultivated so as to converge with the dictations of reason. Therefore, we can also distinguish between two kinds of rationality corresponding to intellectual and moral virtues: rationality in thinking, where reasoning is what constitutes the activity itself; and rationality in practical activity where we may succeed or fail in obeying the precepts of reason. If we are to succeed in the latter, we must have habitually exercised our desires not to constitute an obstacle to our rationality. In the same manner the accumulated wisdom of past generations could be infused into the political system of a given community so as to gradually habituate its members into virtuous behaviour and thus reconcile politics and morality in a difficult but natural process.

Nevertheless, there is still some ambiguity in Aristotle's view because, according to him, if man's end should be activity in accordance with virtue, we come up again with the same problem Plato faced before him, that is, what is the highest form of virtue. Is it the one which is related to collective practices and habits or the one which is related to thinking and is an individual's affair? This question is logically followed by a second-one, i.e. which one develops first and acquires priority over the other?¹²⁰ We have seen how Plato's answer regarding the first question was unconvincing and relied on the assumption that happiness or morality is a matter of discovering the Form. His answer to the second question also depended on his theory of knowledge: the rational part *must* develop first. Aristotle on the other hand argues that the rational and the non-rational parts must be developed simultaneously and in a cooperative manner, but naturally the non-rational part will be the first to be trained since reason is a capacity which is fully developed after a certain age. However, the first question, regarding which is the highest form of virtue, might have never been answered unambiguously by him. Aristotle, as a philosopher, is inclined to recognizing the contemplative life as the highest form of life; but Aristotle as a natural scientist is obligated to consider the consequences of his naturalism. Thus, between the three proposed ways of life, that of gratification, that of politics and that of study, we should definitely choose to avoid the first, but it is uncertain which of the other two will best lead to *eudaimonia*. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095b-1096a, 1177a-1178a)

This ambiguity is a reflection of the perennial tension between the universal and unchanging, on the one hand, and the particular and variable, on the other. Our habits represent the latter whereas our rational capacity represents the former. An account

¹¹⁹ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 62.

¹²⁰ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 159.

which manages to resolve the tension between virtue and politics must give clear priority to either of the two. A leap of logic similar to Plato's is required in order for Aristotle to render such an account philosophically viable. Such a leap –the fact that the *polis* is taken to be the natural end of collective organization and thus the only way to achieve both individual and collective happiness– unavoidably infuses Aristotle's theory with a metaphysical element. This time the metaphysical element is not to be found in the unitary principles of mathematics. Instead his teleological understanding is based on a 'metaphysical biology'.¹²¹ Still, his theory is more connected to reality than that of Plato's, because Aristotle craves for a realistic and practical conclusion and he is not interested in radical philosophical solutions. Thus, the contemplative life might be the highest form of life but the intellectual virtues are not the defining virtues of our attempt to achieve moral completion. They are necessary up to some undetermined degree –because it is in our nature to seek theoretical explanations of this world– but they are not the starting point. The starting point must be practical in order to be feasible at all. In the end, if we have to give priority to either intellectual virtue or moral virtue, we choose the latter, because theory is inferred from reality and not the other way around.

The activity of intellect, on the other hand, in so far as it involves contemplation, seems superior in its seriousness, to aim at no end beyond itself, and to have its own proper pleasure, which augments the activity; it seems also to possess self-sufficiency, time for leisure, and freedom from fatigue, as far as these are humanly possible [...] Such a life is superior to one that is simply human, because someone lives thus, not in so far as he is a human being, but in so far as there is some divine element within him [...] But we ought not to listen to those who exhort us, because we are human, to think of human things, or because we are mortal, to think of mortal things. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177b)

Aristotle's dubiousness, his inner oscillation between his ideal of the contemplative life and his practical approach to ethical and political matters, is here very clear. At the end of the day though, his political philosophy as a whole is a lesson in favour of human beings as political animals. Thus, the starting point must be tangible and explainable, which means that it must be related to virtues easily understandable (that is by perception) and trainable. It must also be related to the community as a whole. The good for man can be then by definition connected to the exercise of virtues in order to justify the purpose of politics, or in other words to justify the conclusion that the *polis* is

¹²¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 148.

the natural end for human beings. This starting point is then moral virtue, which is a disposition to the right desires; a disposition that can be changed or habituated from an early age in order for the non-rational part of the human soul to get closer to the rational part. This is consistent with Aristotle's epistemology: we do not start from the invariable in order to change the variable, but we start from the variable in order to grasp the invariable. Habituation is achieved through repetitive practice in accordance with a set of rational principles which in turn have been previously acquired through experience. Thus, for Aristotle, to be virtuous means to have the capacity to engage in practical reasoning which is in turn supported by the cultivated disposition to act well. Conversely, this disposition cannot guarantee virtue if the capacity for practical reasoning is absent. 'The virtuous disposition is intelligent, and this means the exercise of deliberation, judgement and choice.'¹²²

C) *Politics as phronesis: Ethics can only be social*

Rationalism in activity means the capacity to infer guiding principles for action from previous experience. Since Aristotle's ethical enquiry has a practical aim this inductive reasoning is aiming at how humans may become good and *behave* well; not merely at knowing what morality is¹²³ (a knowledge that in Plato's case meant automatically the possession of morality as well). Becoming good and behaving well is of course a matter of developing one's character. This brings us to the definition of moral virtue as ethical judgments which depend upon habituation and prior deliberation. These ethical judgments are transformed thus into everyday choices which in turn reinforce habituation creating thus a dialectical process towards moral perfection. Pleasures and pains are a useful guide here because just as they can corrupt us by distracting us from habits of virtue, so they can be used to inculcate the virtues.¹²⁴ Every time one makes a choice which signifies the coincidence of desire and reason the corresponding virtue becomes more stable and stronger in one's disposition. Therefore, from the moment moral virtues have been settled into our disposition we have the ability to observe the 'mean' between excess and deficiency *relative to us*. The concept of virtue as a mean is not a doctrine of moderation; instead it is determined by rational principle which has been inferred by the already virtuous agent.¹²⁵ The concerns of practical life are

¹²² Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 35.

¹²³ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 160.

¹²⁴ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 62.

¹²⁵ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 162.

therefore analysed with an appropriate degree of rigour and abstraction. Practical reasoning is able to combine, in one single and situated practical action, the agent's cultivated disposition and ability to rationalize without suppressing the non-rational part of his soul, but working in tandem with it. This latter part of the argument is crucial for the understanding of 'virtue as a mean' and also for the understanding of politics as the equivalent of prudence or *phronesis*. The aim is to avoid extremities because we seek practical and realistic solutions to moral conflict and confusion; moral and political harmony and stability are thus the outcome of everyday virtuous choices which exclude excess and deficiency in practically all matters. Reconciling the universal with the particular renders therefore the Aristotelian virtue as an ability to choose in accordance with a mean. This shows us the structure of our dispositions to action, and clarifies them to us without forcing them into over-simple, artificial moulds.¹²⁶

'The virtues [or vices], then, are certain forms of choice or involve choice'¹²⁷ which in a cyclical manner either further cultivate or impair the ability to act virtuously. 'To act virtuously is not, as Kant was later to think, to act against inclination; it is to act from inclination formed by the cultivation of the virtues... The educated moral agent must of course know what he is doing when he judges or acts virtuously.'¹²⁸ The Aristotelian *prohairesis*, i.e. choice based on prior deliberation which is expressed in a rational voluntary action, is essentially a practical syllogism which by nature, according to Aristotle's teleology, entails a political action; a political action which will avoid the extremes –another attack on Plato's radicalism which dictated the extreme political unification of the community against moral conflict. Rational choice consists then of two elements which correspond to his dualist conception of virtue. Every time a moral agent makes a choice he exercises moral virtue, and when he does it according to principles which have been rationally inferred by experience he exercises his reason. The system of rules, which embodies all those principles that have been rationally inferred from experience, constitutes the political context of moral agency, and its quality essentially determines the degree of moral excellence the agent will be able to achieve.

Therefore, Aristotle's ethical argument cogently leads to the knowledge of the purpose of the state. Knowing what the good life consists in is a necessary part of political science.¹²⁹ Social discourse is by definition an ethical and political discourse

¹²⁶ Annas, 'Classical Greek Philosophy', 302.

¹²⁷ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 161.

¹²⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 149.

¹²⁹ Stephen Everson, 'introduction' in Aristotle, *The Politics and The Constitution of Athens*, xxvii.

because all the actions we call virtuous or vicious are essentially socially and rationally –the particular and the universal– evaluated and are praised or blamed because they are acquired dispositions or attitudes to the emotions rather than simple biological feelings as ‘facts’. ‘Social conversation, then, is a consequence of ordered societies. We can be individuals as moral agents only because we are social.’¹³⁰ The essence of the virtuous life in Aristotle’s *polis*, wherein the cultivation of man’s inherently political character went through the act of ruling and being ruled, was to reinforce both the agent’s moral character with the right evaluative criteria and the *polis*’ collective morality, at the same time. The political argument constitutes in that way a natural continuity of the ethical argument. There is an end (the good life), which is totally objective for him,¹³¹ and there is politics which is the natural way for man to achieve that objective end. It is natural because the final cause and end of a thing is the best, and to be self-sufficient i.e., to live the *eudaimon* life, is the end and the best. And for Aristotle, the proof that the state is naturally the ultimate end for man (the situation in which he finds the opportunity to fulfil the potential to become self-sufficient by exercising his special capacities, that is, reason) is that when the individual is isolated and unable to live in society, he is not self-sufficient; he is not exercising his natural human abilities; he lacks the evaluative mirror for his moral agency; so he must be either a beast or a god (*The Politics* 1253^a 1-30).

Man must be able to exercise his *phronesis* or prudence; the practical activity that may lead him to *eudaimonia* through the application of the right moral principles – inferred from experience– in particular situations. The political community’s aim should be to offer the opportunity and the right guidance for the exercise of prudence. This means that the *Politics*, as a work, follows the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but the political is always assumed to be logically prior, because ethics is the outcome of habituation and politics is itself conceived as the most important kind of habituation (because man is a political animal). Politics constitutes therefore the necessary and natural milieu in which human beings develop the characters they need to enable them to live humanly. Human excellence or virtue, according to Aristotle, can be realized only under the aegis of correct compulsive norms, the just laws of a political community. For this reason ethical discourse concerns itself with moral virtues which presuppose some rule-based common life or other. In that manner the political agenda has been set up clearly during the ethical argument: if moral virtue is the outcome of

¹³⁰ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 188-189.

¹³¹ Everson, *ibid*, xxvi.

habituation (that is framed on principles inferred from experience) then we need political data based on perception in order to commence the induction of political rules which will offer the necessary guidance for everyday virtuous action. Political philosophy is therefore the natural outcome of such an approach.

The *polis* is logically prior to each of its members because it is the *polis* by which humans secure their well being.¹³² Aristotle's *polis* is not a philosophic academia which is purported to enlighten philosophically its members (sufficient enlightenment for moral completeness according to Plato). Aristotle's education primarily refers to the habituating effect that the practical aspect of a *polis*'s life has on its citizens, i.e. the *polis* is a school of life, the frame of an ongoing practical moral education; but Aristotle's ethical objectivism signifies his conception of the *polis* as a school for the good life. The member of the *polis* is the citizen who participates in this education toward the collective and consequently individual well being. According to Aristotle, the degree of this participation determines also the degree of the exercise of our natural political capacities and the quality of this education determines the quality of the citizens. This is why the best form of the state (the best constitution of political action) should be the one that allows the citizens to rule and in turn to be ruled. Because the excellence of the citizen-ruler is not the same as the virtue of the ruled citizen: what a citizen does when ruled is different from what he does when ruling; and practical wisdom, that is, *phronesis* –to know what is the best action for each circumstance– which is the purpose of Aristotle's ethical inquiry, demands from the citizen to learn the habit of ruling by being ruled. This process is the equivalent of training our passions and desires to follow our reason so as to be able exercise reason, but not against human nature. A man who has been trained in being ruled should be better equipped to ruling because his desires will not pose an obstacle to his practical reason.

When a man is in the position of being ruled he exercises *correct* opinion but when he takes his turn to rule, he engages in *practical reasoning or prudent choice-making* in the circumstances.¹³³ *Phronesis* is the ability to act so that principle will take concrete form. It is not only itself a virtue, it is the keystone of all virtue, for without it one cannot be virtuous.¹³⁴ Correct opinion seems to be just an ability to diagnose the virtuous or un-virtuous conduct of those ruling and praise it or criticize it accordingly. Thus, ruling is obviously more significant for Aristotle, in relation to the formation of

¹³² Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 147.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 220-221.

¹³⁴ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 71.

the character, because it incorporates the element of voluntariness along with rational deliberation about a choice which may severely affect the moral outlook not only of the conducting moral agent but also of the recipients of this action. Political responsibility is thus connected in a definitive manner with Aristotle's concept of *prohairesis* and character formation, 'for the excellence of a ruler differs from that of a citizen'. (*The Politics*, 1277^a 20)

Ruling cultivates and requires at the same time the agent's practical wisdom, which is intelligence regarding foresight in particular situations, morally defined. This 'moral intelligence' needs to be trained and can only be trained when it faces the necessary internal and external moral threats, of which politics is infamous.¹³⁵ Political situations will certainly pose threats to virtue as exercised in relation to oneself and to virtue as exercised in relation to others. The practically wise agent will be able to resolve those threats, achieving therefore justice.¹³⁶ Practical wisdom is thus the cardinal virtue because it signifies the inter-determination of politics and ethics. It allows the universal principle to be applied without conflicting with either individual virtue or virtue as it is defined by the public role. 'Public responsibilities, public rule, is concerned with securing the *good life* of its members through laws that habituate citizens to virtuous practices *over and above* securing life itself'.¹³⁷ When this public rule is conducted by the practically wise the good of the citizens is secured by implementing and maintaining the right laws, by guarding justice. In such a community the universal (the good man) and the particular (the good citizen) will coincide because those who rule conceive justice as the good of others as human beings.

To recapitulate, Aristotle is engaged in the single enterprise of understanding the workings of states, and of the people who are part of them, so that the political philosopher can securely determine how the state should be constituted, if it is to satisfy the purpose which human nature requires of it.¹³⁸ The good life is a life which seeks to acquire and exercise the goods of the soul, which are the peculiar virtues of humans. And the study of the best constitution or the best state becomes thus a part of the study of the human nature. Politics is the same state as *phronesis* or prudence: a (virtuous) practical activity towards *eudaimonia*. But while *phronesis* refers primarily to the individual's virtue, politics is more concerned with acquiring and preserving *eudaimonia* for 'a people and a polis'. So it follows that those who conduct politics

¹³⁵ Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 43.

¹³⁶ Crisp, *ibid.*, xxi.

¹³⁷ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 177.

¹³⁸ Everson, *ibid.*, xxxvii.

should also be prudent, at least in the ideal *polis*. Politics is conceived of as the architectonic virtue whose end is the best good,¹³⁹ the equivalent of Plato's *dikaiosune*. However, unlike Plato, whose main concern was to change politics in order to let the already moral rule (making thus the unison of morality and politics possible), for Aristotle politics is the ultimate practical activity; the one that allows the realization of morality in and by practice. Thus Justice is not thus a theoretical principle waiting to be discovered and applied; instead it is the outcome of virtuous action, and for an action to be virtuous it has to be promoting the good of the *polis* and its members; the good which has been inferred from experience and has been objectively defined.

D) The political and the contemplative man

Notwithstanding Aristotle's forceful attempt to present ethics and politics as naturally inter-determined, he recognizes that there is a difficulty in discussing the moral benefits of the political life over the private-contemplative life. As already discussed, such an ambiguity derives from the potential tension between the rational and the non-rational parts of the soul, a tension which seemed to be insurmountable in Plato's analogy of the *polis* and the soul. In the conclusion of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle argues that the private-contemplative life is potentially the perfect happiness for man, creating thus some kind of confusion as to which is the best way eventually to live the good life: the political life, which is necessary for the habituation of the moral dispositions, or the contemplative life which is self-sufficient since it is occupied only with the intellect? Aristotle does not give a definite answer although this can be inferred from his work as a whole. Nevertheless, because of this ambiguity, he is unable to avoid the metaphysical element in his ethical argument which, unlike his political argument, seems to be unwilling to reject totally the Platonic views on the essence of morality and the dualist state of the soul. In recognition of this difficulty and in defence of the natural unity between politics and ethics Aristotle claims that the outcome of the contemplative life, i.e. wisdom, is not the same as prudence which is the outcome of correct habituation and experience; indeed, it is a more finished form of knowledge, but it does not produce results in the political world because it is irrelevant to it: contemplation, or *theoria*, is a natural tendency for all humans irrespective of any external factors.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Reeve, *Practices of Reason*, 77, 111, 113.

¹⁴⁰ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 182-183.

The idea of ‘thinking of thinking’, an escape from the mundane limitations of our cognitive abilities, which always require a distinct object, is obviously very important for Aristotle and reveals Plato’s influence on his thought. However, it is clear that it is not further developed by him because he understands that it will not be of interest to his audience, and it might create further confusion in respect to *eudaimonia*.¹⁴¹ He therefore concludes that wisdom, regarding theory, is irrelevant to ethics, since ethics presupposes a relation of one’s self to others; it cannot be confined within an individual and it therefore requires a more pluralist and realist –at least methodologically– approach. The metaphysical element lies in the fact that Aristotle implies that pure wisdom, theorizing about theory, may be possible individually and, in fact, it must be pursued for the sake of *eudaimonia*, because it brings humans closer to the divine, without ever making clear whether this pursuit is a realistic-one and whether it should take priority over practical matters.

[T]he metaphysical contemplation of which furnishes man with his specific and ultimate *telos*, can itself take no interest in the merely human, let alone the dilemmatic; it is nothing other than thought timelessly thinking itself and conscious of nothing but itself. Since such contemplation is the ultimate human *telos* [...] there is a certain tension between Aristotle’s view of man as essentially political and his view of man as essentially metaphysical. To become *eudaimon* material prerequisites and social prerequisites are necessary [...] [Thus] in many passages where Aristotle discusses individual virtues, the notion that their possession and practice is in the end subordinate to metaphysical contemplation would seem oddly out of place.¹⁴²

The more realistic aspect of Aristotle’s view is that wisdom may be enough for one’s own happiness but it is not sufficient for the collective *eudaimonia* which, in the end, should be the final end according to his teleological position. Of course, this implies another kind of dualism between individual and collective happiness. The wise man who is the one likely to achieve the first may not be appropriate for realizing the latter. The wise man may not be appropriate for public matters. Conversely, the just or prudent man may be cut out for the latter but he will never be able to explore the realms of contemplation in depth because of the limits posed by social life’s needs. The central question that reflects such an ambiguity in Aristotle’s theory is whether we should prefer to live the life of the wise or the just man.¹⁴³ The life of the wise man means

¹⁴¹ Annas, ‘Classical Greek Philosophy’, 303.

¹⁴² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 158.

¹⁴³ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought Vol. 1*, 184.

fulfilling intellectual virtue while the life of the just man means cultivating dispositional virtue. Against Plato's unitary principle that glorifies the intellect and dismisses the human disposition as the part that must be suppressed, for Aristotle, we should direct ourselves to the betterment of the two goals: of an active life intellectually and of an active life practically, that is, politically. Nevertheless, his conclusion about moral perfection is not so different from Plato's. Perfect harmony will once again be possible only in an ideal state, where society will be morally self-sufficient so as not to pose obstacles to its members in their pursuit of intellectual virtue. These two goals reflect Aristotle's conception of the duality of the human nature: the activity of thinking is self-sufficient whereas the activity of politics is socially dependent; they are both necessary to each other, but they are difficult to synchronize. The wise man is self-sufficient whereas the just man is only just in relation to others; thus being wise does not entail being just and vice versa. In the end though, the self-sufficient activity of thinking requires an already self-sufficient community of members, thus *de facto* the just man seems to be the prerequisite for the wise man, and not the other way around.

The distinction between moral and intellectual virtue and the attempt to assign priority between them illustrates how Aristotle conceives this dualism in the human soul and the resulting tension between the philosopher and politics. Humans are the only beings so heavily self-divided because they are the only beings who have the capacity to act as ethical agents. Philosophy seems to be the outcome of this division as are its ever-lasting attempts to reconcile our rational aspirations for intellectual perfection and the impediments posed by social interaction, leaving thus true happiness as a confusing concept. The practical solution, according to Aristotle, is to conceive the two parts not as undermining each other, but as two parts that must be synergistically developed in order to become perfect. Nevertheless, in final analysis, his teleology gives a natural priority to moral virtue because man is a political animal and individual self-sufficiency is a wishful thought, whereas collective self-sufficiency is a tangible aim; for Aristotle, an aim almost realized by the ancient Greek *polis*. We can infer, therefore, that the priority is given by Aristotle to moral virtue over intellectual virtue and to the political over the individual. Aristotle used the Greek *polis* as the objective normative standard for assigning priority to the political, which was nevertheless an arbitrary assumption. Plato's own failed attempt toward moral objectivism was also permeated by the arbitrary concept of the Form.

The above argument reveals that despite Aristotle's certainty in the strong interrelation between ethics and politics, he accepts that in practice, at least, there is a

possibility for the discontinuity between individual virtues (potentially reflecting the perfect intellect) and political virtues (potentially reflecting the perfect character). He discusses this possibility in the *Politics* where he is considering ‘whether the happiness of the individual is the same as that of the state or different.’ His answer is that in reality no one can doubt that they are the same (*The Politics*, 1324^a 5). Even for the wise man who lives the perfect private-contemplative life, there should be a natural inclination toward the realization of his wisdom in political action (reverberating here Plato’s own conviction that the philosopher must return to the Cave regardless of the cost for his personal moral integrity; in fact he must return for the sake of it). The philosopher naturally wants to participate in promoting general *eudaimonia*. The political nature (as it has been defined by Aristotle’s metaphysical biology) commands that the philosopher translates his wisdom into justice. However, where for Plato this translation is self-evident since the philosopher has acquired perfect knowledge, for Aristotle the transition from wisdom to practical reasoning and politics is more complex. One reason for this is because he never makes clear whether perfect wisdom is even possible at all. The second is because of the problem between the particular and the universal or the practical and the abstract, which in Aristotle’s account of practical reasoning is a problem of how to reconcile politics and ethics under an objective definition of happiness:

If we are right in our view, and happiness is assumed to be acting well, the active life will be the best, both for every city collectively, and for individuals. Not that a life of action must necessarily have relation to others, as some persons think, nor are those ideas only to be regarded as practical which are pursued for the sake of practical results, but much more the thoughts and contemplations which are independent and complete in themselves; since acting well, and therefore a certain kind of action, is an end, and even in the case of external actions the directing mind is most truly said to act. Neither, again, is it necessary that states that are cut off from others and choose to live alone should be inactive; for activity, as well as other things, may take place by sections; there are many ways in which the sections of a state act upon one another. The same thing is equally true of every individual. If this were otherwise, the gods and the universe, who have no external actions over and above their own energies, would be far enough from perfection. Hence it is evident that the same life is best for each individual, and for states and for mankind collectively (*The Politics*, 1325^b 15-30).

In Aristotle's understanding, politics and ethics should merge inescapably into one concept –but not into one and single unitary principle. He repeatedly argues that the aim is not a theoretical discovery of morality but the realization of happiness which is the outcome of the study of ethics and politics. Nevertheless, he recognizes – following the Socratic discourse– that if there is one serious obstacle to this single concept, it should be the tension between the contemplative-isolated life and the political life because they constitute two different, potentially conflicting, ways to *eudaimonia*. Self-sufficient individual virtues are obviously threatening the socially depended political virtues because they conceive the moral agent as a-social. The individual virtues may therefore be against the fulfilment of public roles towards collective justice; and vice-versa, politics seems to exclude moral self-sufficiency.¹⁴⁴ 'How can we make those two concepts coincide?' is Aristotle's central question; not so different to Plato's previous argument that saw their coincidence only in a utopian *Politeia*.

Aristotle states the political problem in relation to morality clearly and in the very modern terms of political ethics: 'How can that which is not even lawful be the business of the statesman or the legislator?' (*The Politics*, 1324^b 25); and further down, 'some renounce political power, and think that the life of the freeman is different from the life of the statesman and the best of all; but others think the life of the statesman best' (*The Politics*, 1325^a 20). The debate between the philosopher and the politician, firstly developed by Plato, seems to be troubling Aristotle. But ultimately, for him, man is a political animal and ethics, as a whole, is an inherent element of human societies, which in final analysis are always political societies. Thus, the proper cultivation of the first presupposes a systematic development of the second. The purely philosophical life, which is an ultimate aim for man (and, arguably, as we saw, incompatible to the demands of political life), cannot by itself be sufficient for his moral perfection: individual virtue and political virtue cannot be disconnected; now, not because perfect knowledge commands it, but because Aristotle's teleological naturalism dictates the interdependence of moral and intellectual virtue.

In this relationship between the two kinds of virtue, the disposition of character is, as we analyzed above, the most crucial part because it is the starting point for moral development. It is when the members of a political society realize this that the significance of the state as the main habituating institution becomes apparent. The creation of the good political community is thus the outcome of deliberation and it is a

¹⁴⁴ Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 45.

rational choice. In this way Aristotle is again attempting to reconcile the natural with the rational and the dispositional: the state (social organization) is the natural end for human beings, but how this end is going to be realized depends on the rational capacities of its members which in turn infer the right principles of social organization. Therefore the degree of these rational capacities and of their exercise determines the criterion according to which we judge the quality of a *polis*. ‘The nature of a thing is what it is when fully developed’,¹⁴⁵ but in the case of human beings full development relies on the use of the inherent ability to reason. Therefore the *polis* is not the final point in a process of developing moral life towards happiness but it is its culmination in terms of moral quality. This is why it signifies an end not in temporal, but in teleological terms: it is explained by reference to the good of its citizens which has been previously inferred from the study of the human nature.¹⁴⁶ Thus, the priority of moral virtue over intellectual virtue derives from the priority of the political over the individual. This is not simply because the whole is naturally more important than the part (as it was Aristotle’s normative assumption), but because the political is the most important activity towards achieving the good life both collectively and individually. In other words, intellectual virtue cannot be possible at all outside the political community; but this also implies that intellectual virtue can never be perfected:

Thus the good man’s final achieved self-sufficiency in his contemplation of timeless reason does not entail that the good man does not need friends, just as it does not entail that he does not need a certain level of material prosperity. Correspondingly a city founded on justice and friendship can only be the best kind of city if it enables its citizens to enjoy the life of metaphysical contemplation.¹⁴⁷

E) Reconciling politics with virtue: practical wisdom and the conditions of eudaimonia

The end of moral education is for Aristotle, like for Plato, human excellence, that is, the best human excellence which is related to living well or *eudaimonia*. Their difference though is striking in how each philosopher understands happiness and the direct connection of education with the ultimate virtue. It is primarily a methodological difference which nevertheless results in opposite theories of knowledge and naturally in opposite understandings of politics and ethics. For Plato virtue is the outcome of

¹⁴⁵ Everson, *ibid.*, p. xxi.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

¹⁴⁷ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 158.

theoretical abstract training in first principles, the Forms; there is not a distinction between moral and intellectual virtue as such. Political organization is the outcome of knowledge and in its ideal form represents a political structure which is universal and unchanging. We have seen how this conception leads to an understanding of politics as a field to be dominated by philosophers, corresponding to the domination of reason over passion. Thus, the end of education is perfect theory or pure wisdom, which then will re-define the problematic reality. Now, even if Plato himself did not develop a comprehensive explanation of the Forms¹⁴⁸ what he intended to state was very clear: philosophy, as science, is a matter of stability and precision, based on unchanging knowledge. All those elements are of course only to be found in abstract thought and universal concepts corresponding to an education in geometry and numbers. Thus, if we want politics not to pose a threat to morality we need to start conceiving of it as a scientific matter, and as a scientific matter it should be left to the experts i.e. the philosophers. The radical character of this proposition is not mitigated even if we consider that Plato only wanted politics to be checked by philosophy; to be judged by a set of criteria which have been rationally discovered; not to be dominated by them in a real and absolute sense.

For Aristotle, on the other hand, virtue is the outcome of practice; ethics is a study of everyday habits. Naturally, education cannot start from abstract first principles. Instead, the first principles should be inferred by us according to our social experience. Thus, moral perfection is separated from intellectual perfection because it is related to improving daily habits, not theoretical understanding. Perfect virtue is not the means for re-defining reality, it is the outcome of an ideal reality; thus, the purpose of moral education is not pure wisdom but practical reasoning. This is why constructing the ideal state is a prerequisite of perfect virtue. Theoretical knowledge is not unchanging; it is variable like forms of biological life are variable. However, if it is difficult actually to locate Plato's Forms, it is equally difficult to ascertain what kind of social experience should be used as normative matrix from which we can infer first principles. The question is 'On what basis do we start the construction of the ideal state?' Of course, for Aristotle, the model for this kind of inductive knowledge was the Greek polis, though an idealized version of it. This is the reason for Aristotle's own indecisiveness in regard to whether philosophers should actively pursue the discovery of an ideal society or they should just stay within a pluralist approach which is dictated by real life's experiences (methodologically following his own biological studies).

¹⁴⁸ Annas, 'Classical Greek Philosophy', 291.

Aristotle was able to recognize and understand the pluralist nature of life and he attempted to make the diversity of the regimes of the Greek city-states intelligible to his audience in both political and ethical terms. But this is a recognition which is always completed by an attempt to find the natural *telos* of all life; the *telos* which is by definition strongly connected to objective evaluative criteria. Thus, his political pluralism is contradicted by his ethical objectivism.

Aristotle, as a political philosopher, is ready to accept the variety of political conduct (unlike Plato); he was aware of the possibility of bad laws which are better than no laws at all; he is even ready to propose seemingly unethical strategies toward preserving political power; but he is not ready to accept the ethical consequences of this variety, because his aim is to change political societies, not merely to describe them. After having understood the plurality of political and ethical life he had to propose an argument for their betterment. However, the plurality of political and ethical life was conceptually limited within the paradigm of city-states. Like Plato, Aristotle also treats an ideal version of the ancient Greek *polis* as a normative concept, failing to understand how a historically situated entity cannot be set as the source of his teleological objectivism. Since Aristotle is not ready to resolve this contradiction between moral perfectionism and political reality in a radical manner, like Plato did, there will always be an inherent ambiguity in his political philosophy regarding the ideal life: his perfectionism seems to be the outcome of either the unrealistic isolated contemplative life or the unrealistic vision of the ideal *polis*.

Aristotle's understanding of political and ethical pluralism is related to his recognition that practical life is too chaotic to be systematized, too variable to offer the much needed coherent experience according to which we can infer first principles. So, Aristotle seems to be struggling with this ambiguity himself, knowing that any attempt towards justifying the contemplative life too strongly is doomed to become very similar to Plato's own metaphysical ideas, whereas any attempt to characterize the variety of political constitutions as clear evidence in favour of an insurmountable pluralism is doomed to turn similarly into –the much condemned by Plato– an unqualified moral relativism. Intellectual perfection seems to be incompatible with political virtue because it can only be conceived in absolute and isolated (divine) terms whereas political virtue or prudence has to deal with variable socially defined ethical situations. How can we then avoid this ambiguity? Aristotle's solution may not be philosophically totally convincing, but it offers a realistic overriding objective i.e. that the avoidance of extremes in politics, the minimizing of civic disruption and the risk of revolution, strife

and war should be the starting point for a morally better life. ‘Aristotle’s political values stress stability not at any cost but through the exercise of prudence’¹⁴⁹ in order to make individual virtue a real possibility. This means that ethical conduct is not defined only by its outcome because the outcome is never certain and never permanent. For Aristotle, practical wisdom is the ability to reconcile certain types of action, which are in principle prohibited or enjoined irrespective of circumstances and consequences,¹⁵⁰ with the good of the community as a whole. His view is thus teleological and morally objective without being consequentialist.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 41.

¹⁵⁰ Virtues which appear to belong to the form of human life as such or norms which seem to be written into the concept of society in order for this to be possible at all. See MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 74.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

3. Machiavelli's Theory: The Disunity of Politics and Morality vs. Morality as the Necessary Ground for Politics

A) The breaking from classical political philosophy

Plato's dialogues are tackling a problem that seems to be touching the limits of human perfectibility and thus remains irresolvable. The relationship between politics and morality as presented previously appears to be problematic because of the question of how we can reconcile private virtue with political justice. This reconciliation seems to be the prerequisite for Plato's vision of a community where philosophy and politics are not divorced. In the *Apology* the Socratic conclusion is that the only way to realizing true justice is private virtue. In the *Crito* the Socratic counter-proposition is that the violation of the collective laws, even if these are unjust, is the starting point of both moral and political degradation. Moral and political unity would only be possible in the ideal *Republic*, an absolute regime not without some serious practical dangers for both its leaders and the rest of the community. Despite these dangers, Plato seems to conclude, a virtuous life, isolated from the community it was born from, was not worth living. Morality, by definition, cannot be a-social; its philosophical unity requires a comprehensive political realization. Thus, after the description of the problem and the acknowledgment of its difficulty, Plato made a practical as well as a moral choice: the purpose of philosophy is to aid politics, and politics should choose to rely on philosophy. Their tension is recognized, but the possibility of good life relies on virtuous agents having the knowledge to overcome it.

Aristotle, on the other hand, believed in two major aims of politics; first, to provide the peace and necessities –the external goods– that are essential for leisure and for the study of the human good, which is the only truly leisured activity; and second, that it aims to provide the civic virtues that guarantee the justice, stability and harmony of the *polis*.¹⁵² The harmony of the *polis* was the outcome of the ethical completion of both the collectivity and the individual. Good politics meant ethically good citizens, in an interactive relationship, and even if total coherence between ethics and politics is impossible in reality –because of the limits of human rational capacities– man should aim for it because he is, in the end, a political animal. The highest form of life is the

¹⁵² Reeve, *Practices of Reason*, 114.

collective life. Happiness and justice are social phenomena; there can be no moral agency outside the community; human nature itself leaves no doubt about that. Thus, the interdependency of politics and ethics was not simply a normative assumption for the classical philosophers. It was also a practical choice with strong evaluative connotations: happiness, justice or the good life demanded this interdependency, even if, most of the time, the hard realities of social life show us how difficult this is to achieve.

The significance of Machiavelli's political philosophy also stems from his views about politics and its implicit, as we are about to see, connection with the world of morals. This is why in a study of the relationship between politics, justice and ethics he must naturally follow Plato and Aristotle, despite the chronological and contextual difference; or, maybe, because of it. The degree of divergence about Machiavelli's central view, his basic political attitude and ethical understandings makes him a pivotal thinker in the evolution of political philosophy especially with regards to what should be the role of morality in political conduct. It is one of the few general agreements about Machiavelli that he engages in this debate with the ancient classical philosophers. However, there are several interpretations as to whether he was affected by classical political philosophy in a positive manner or he strongly wanted to deny the possibility that ethics is really that important for the good conduct of politics. At a first glance, Machiavelli seems to be one of the thinkers of early modernity who illustrate very precisely the tension or even the rivalry between conventional ethics and the purposes of politics. Still, it is one thing to recognize the descriptive character of his works, i.e. explaining the fact that political action may not be conducive to an ethical life, and it is a different thing to claim that Machiavelli himself prescribed an *amoral* ethics as the only way to more effective politics. Despite the predominantly political and seemingly amoral character of Machiavelli's works, it is this implicit ethical ambiguity of his works that makes him such an important thinker with regard to the interrelation between a political regime and its ethical aims. Some of the most common questions about his works go like this: Is there, according to Machiavelli, a specific way to political life, based on a given set of moral principles and ends? Or, is Machiavelli attempting to analyze the political attitudes of his time, and offer some technical advice in support of greater governmental capability and cast aside ethical considerations as irrelevant, or even, detrimental to political regimes?

Machiavelli was historically related to the civic-humanist movement, which attempted to renovate or rediscover ancient wisdom and ways of thinking about political

and moral matters –mainly wisdom coming from Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Thucydides and Plutarch. On these grounds it is commonly accepted that he should have followed the general trend of his time and tried to think of how classical arguments about politics and morality could contribute to the debates of his time.¹⁵³ Thus, Hampshire argues, ‘Machiavelli’s theory of history was like a neo-classical building, a lively imitation of ancient models’.¹⁵⁴ However, it is still inconclusive whether he is a moral and political philosopher purporting to teach people how to see through deceptive appearances in politics. Is Machiavelli a public educator, within the tradition of Socrates and Plato, who seeks to uphold the “rule of law” against the “rule of men”¹⁵⁵ as a medicine against both political and ethical disorder?¹⁵⁶ Or is he a skilled professional who, from the point of view of a technician of politics, only wanted to explain why the preservation of the state should only and always “rely on power but never on moral principle”?¹⁵⁷

Whether there is a dichotomy, or interdependency, between politics and ethics, I want to argue, is the question which constitutes the source for the most fundamental differences in understanding Machiavelli’s works, but also the reason for his philosophical importance. Based on this question we can distinguish between three general interpretative traditions –with several variations among them– which read his political works, first, as a statement of hard political realism or *amoralism*, which dictates the separation of politics and ethics altogether (a repetition of Thrasymachus’ arguments); second, as an attempt to revive a patriotic –or in contemporary terms communitarian– republicanism (of which there are two variations, one closer to political *amoralism* and one more ethically principled but juxtaposed to Christian morality); and third, as a covert way of explaining how corrupt times entail a transvaluation of virtues, which means that people must train themselves to distinguish real virtue from apparent virtue as the only way to ethical and political completion –a view closer to classical republicanism in the sense that the ethical objectives of the state can be considered as universally legitimate for the human species.

The three approaches may express sometimes similar arguments and agree on the interpretative complexity and difficulty of Machiavelli’s work, but their

¹⁵³ See Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics*, 4, and Wootton, ‘introduction’, xiii.

¹⁵⁴ Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 178.

¹⁵⁵ Of course, it is more appropriate to describe Socrates and Plato’s position as the ‘rule of reason’ against the ‘rule of passion’. However, the essence of this argument is that, despite the more republican context in which Machiavelli speaks of the ‘rule of law’, he stays within the philosophical tradition which distinguishes between a ‘higher’ form of human activity guided by rules and principles and human activity which is the outcome of men’s baser qualities.

¹⁵⁶ Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics*, 2-3.

¹⁵⁷ Wootton, *ibid.*, xiv.

fundamental disagreement comes from different understandings regarding the ethical essence and objectives of his work. Despite the inconclusiveness with regard to his ultimate political and moral aims, and given that it is true that there is enough margin for every “reader to make up her or his own mind on how to reconcile the irreconcilable”¹⁵⁸, we can assume that, for Machiavelli, the irreconcilable was something similar to the Socratic perennial question on how to live a just life in an unjust world. His actual answer is certainly political, whether positively or negatively conceived in moral terms, and does not reduce the importance of the analytical explanations he offered about the nature of the relationship between politics and ethics. Thus, even if he did not intend to start a deep philosophical discussion about the nature of morality and of its authority, by his concreteness and sharpness as a political advisor he forced the deeper question to the surface.¹⁵⁹ That is, we need to expose the forces that drive governments to conceal the morally repulsive extent of conceit and violence to which they hold themselves committed in defence of some kind of national independence or some other collective aim.¹⁶⁰

B) The amoral Machiavelli: A first traditional interpretation

Each interpretative tradition has serious reasons to claim that Machiavelli’s thought was indeed radical and original and marked a break with classical and medieval political philosophy and signified the transition to Modernity. Each tradition argues for a break on different grounds and according to different motives. However, we should notice, each tradition makes an argument always with regard to the above fundamental question on the relationship between the ethical and the political. In other words, ‘Machiavelli’s problem’ is commonly recognized as the intersection between morality and politics. What is not commonly agreed on is his own answer to the problem. Machiavelli preaches that aggression, conquest, domination, violence and deceit stand opposite to justice. Yet all these denials of justice seem, more often than not, to be indispensable means to the security and survival of any city.¹⁶¹ Naturally, the starting point is the question of whether Machiavelli was indeed against any deep philosophical analysis of politics, which would require the elaboration of those core ethical concepts about human nature, the human good and justice as a basis for political action.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., xxxvi.

¹⁵⁹ Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 13.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 162.

According to the first ‘amoral interpretation’, he was the primary thinker, who clearly expressed that the central problem of political ethics was the contradictory claims of the ‘ethically good’, on the one hand, and the ‘practically necessary’, on the other. His civic humanist and Christian background, in combination with the political realities of his place and time, enabled him to develop a very definite but limited set of “unethical value judgments”: that we should consider men as they are, and government as a utilitarian, human institution; and not judge men by one set of transcendent moral standards and classify regimes by their intentions, but both by their actual behaviour.¹⁶² Morality in politics is decided by results; its ethics are its consequences. Thus, the concept of virtue takes a new meaning; since the overriding concern for a ruler is now to maintain his rule, his main political virtue should be the special ability that allows him to achieve this.¹⁶³ The new non-philosophic ‘reason of state’ means a permanent conceptual transition from governing a republic according to rules of justice to the knowledge of the means of preserving domination over a people.¹⁶⁴ According to this reading Machiavelli’s response to Socrates is that philosophy is indeed irrelevant to politics. The certain knowledge of moral principles and goals must be substituted by a variable perception of what is politically effective at any given time.

Benedetto Croce describes Machiavelli as “an anguished humanist... a moralist who ‘occasionally experiences moral nausea’ in contemplating a world in which political ends can be achieved only by means that are morally evil, and thereby the man who divorced the province of politics from that of ethics”.¹⁶⁵ Generally speaking this tradition gives to the political an independent status of its own: of politics for politics’ sake.¹⁶⁶ According to this approach we should recognize Machiavelli, whether his was or not a moral man himself, as the first major writer of politics who recognizes the practical objectives of the government as irrelevant to ethical claims. Until his time, every political philosopher had assumed that the political states cohere, or should cohere, because of some moral unity,¹⁶⁷ following the normative assumptions made by Plato and Aristotle. With Machiavelli it was made clear how ethical objectives obscure political aims, sometimes on purpose, leaving thus leaders with the task of understanding that the state must have a different ‘amoral ethics’, which in turn demands a different understanding of political skill as permanently separated from

¹⁶² Bernard Crick, ‘introduction’ in Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, 51, 53.

¹⁶³ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought*, Vol. 2, 251.

¹⁶⁴ Maurizio Viroli, *From Politics to Reason of State*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1992), 2.

¹⁶⁵ Berlin, *Against the Current*, 29

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 35.

¹⁶⁷ Crick, *ibid.*, 35.

private virtue. The “reason of state” takes priority for those who want to govern, but not based on any principled grounds. Its consequentialism is as amoral as it gets: the end is the power of the state itself, nothing more. Power is self-reproducing and thus has intrinsic value that overrides all ethical objectives. This ‘Machiavellian’ reading suggests not only that philosophy is irrelevant to politics, but that it may be harmful for those who want to perpetuate their rule. The priority of ‘the reason of state’ therefore is the outcome of this desire to dominate; and to dominate for good, one must conceive how morality is impertinent. The corruptibility of the human disposition is incorrigible, making thus the educational role of the state unimportant in comparison to its ability to use its physical power effectively. The moral character is irrelevant to the way politics is conducted because politics can only enforce and punish types of behaviour, not to develop them morally.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that this explanation about the relationship between politics and ethics was indeed forcefully brought to the fore by Machiavelli, there can be objections to the claim that his praised originality and consequent philosophical impact is based on his actual prescription of *amoral* politics. Why would it be so radical, to prescribe something that had already been practically implemented and had been analyzed theoretically in the past? The harsh, amoral and pragmatic political language separated from any true ethical objectives did not constitute, essentially, a new argument. Plato and Aristotle had made the same arguments on political amoralism and the necessities that come with the desire for power more eloquently long before Machiavelli. To ascertain or even argue that in reality politics and ethics are separated and must remain so for efficiency’s sake was philosophically hardly original. Many philosophers had stated the problem in their attempt to resolve it.

Machiavelli as an irresponsible political advisor, or a morbid realpolitiker, can persuade himself that all political negotiations, when fully analyzed, can be seen to have outcomes that are wholly determined by the power relationships among the parties involved. This is the equivalent of scepticism about practical reason, and both in its political and private form this scepticism is implausible for many reasons, but mainly because it oversimplifies the dynamic of individual practical reason when realized into politics.¹⁶⁸ MacIntyre is therefore correct when he says about Machiavelli that ‘[a]lthough he pays verbal obeisances to the distinction between ethics and politics, he makes clear the irrelevance of drawing it too sharply. Such a distinction depends upon there being a distinction between private and public life of such a kind that I can

¹⁶⁸ Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 175-176.

consider what it is best for me to do without considering in what political order it is requisite for me to live, either because I treat the political order as given and unalterable context of private action, or because I think the political order irrelevant for some other reason. Machiavelli resembles Plato in making it clear on how many occasions ethics and politics merge.’¹⁶⁹

C) Civic Humanism and the separation of politics and ethics: A second traditional interpretation (variation one of Machiavelli’s false Republicanism)

According to the second general interpretative tradition, Machiavelli is closer to humanist republicans than to *amoral* political realism. Considering the unconvincing ‘amoral reading’ of his works, this might be justifiably a more plausible alternative.¹⁷⁰ Still the source of the problem in this alternative reading is his moral argument: How does Machiavelli’s republicanism fares, when separated from ethical arguments? There are two variations of Machiavellian republicanism as a result of this problem. The first variation conceives politics and ethics as irrelevant and the sole ethical criterion used to judge the political objectives of a community is a pure form of consequentialist utilitarianism. In this form of patriotic republicanism what matters is the survival of the state. There are no moral qualifications for this end, and this is why *The Prince* and *The Discourses* can be used interchangeably as political guides. If Machiavelli himself preferred a more collective type of government this can be explained purely in terms of practical effectiveness. It can be said, therefore, that Machiavelli is understood here as a prominent advocate of his time. What was new in the Renaissance was an attempt to respond to some of the problems caused by the instability which resulted from the claims of Christian morality against those of the *polis*. The attempt to revive ancient republicanism was essentially an attempt to implicate citizens in the moral responsibility for those actions taken for their sake. This in turn meant the rediscovery of clear ethical standards for public conduct which were not related to Christian morality.¹⁷¹ The problem was to find those ethical standards in a world where the *polis* as a way of life did not exist anymore, the alternative being a patriotic utilitarianism.

The tradition of civic humanism, in which Machiavelli is classified by this approach, generally praised the concept of civic liberty, by which they meant ‘the rule

¹⁶⁹ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 124.

¹⁷⁰ Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics*, 5.

¹⁷¹ Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics*, 106.

of law'. Its opposite was absolute, irrational will above all law. This meant that civic humanists wanted to be related to ancient classical republicanism in an authentic manner. Many of their arguments were structured by the standards of Aristotelian and Ciceronian texts, according to Roman law and history, and according to the indigenous communal practices which evolved 'prudentially' to suit contingent circumstances.¹⁷² However, it is with regard to their prudential reading of contingent circumstances from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries that we can observe the equation of liberty and participatory citizenship to have been narrowed from the ancient view that all citizens as 'political animals' should take turns in ruling and being ruled, to a notion that collective politics is about finding the right leaders to govern the led.¹⁷³ It seems that the practical wisdom of the citizen was then confined to a study of how to choose a governor that will govern according to the given sets of practical ends. Thus, despite the declarations of this tradition toward the revival of ancient civic republicanism, especially in the city of Florence, the *polis* as the natural means through which men fulfil their human capacities no longer existed. Therefore, the combination of the conditions of political corruption and the disappearance of the morality of the *polis* demanded a focus on a different kind of creative rule (much stronger and autonomous) and consequently a kind of passive citizenship (citizens as critical but not participating subjects).¹⁷⁴ Still this was a kind of false ancient republicanism, because the civic spirit cannot be maintained if not based on stable evaluative criteria for both the rulers and the citizens; and consequentialism cannot provide such a stability since it overrides all other criteria.

These basic characteristics of civic humanism derive from the decline of the *polis* and the rise of the large-scale state. This process has had immense consequences for the conceptual relation between ethics and politics. The milieu of the moral life is transformed; it now becomes a matter not of the evaluations of men living in the forms of immediate community in which the interrelated character of moral and political judgments is a matter of daily experience, but of evaluations of men often governed from far off, living private lives in communities which are politically powerless.¹⁷⁵ Rhetorical skill was to be used to persuade fellow citizens by means of words so that they perform actions that are advantageous to the 'state'. The end of the state was determined thus by the skill of persuasion,¹⁷⁶ or the ability to appear virtuous although

¹⁷² Coleman, *A History of Political Thought*, Vol. 2, 206.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 206.

¹⁷⁴ Skinner, *The Foundations*, Vol. 1, 124-125.

¹⁷⁵ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 96.

¹⁷⁶ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought*, Vol. 2, 236-237.

what 'virtuous' meant was not clear. This ability was the natural outcome of the dominant Christian morality, a bifurcated morality: on the one hand, there were the absolutely unquestionable commandments, unchanging and contextless but also arbitrary; and on the other hand, there were the self-justifying rules of the political and economic order. The realm of secular power seemed to acquire its own norms and justifications. Moral rules were technical rules about the means to these ends. Moreover they were to be used on the assumption that all men are somewhat corrupt.¹⁷⁷

According to this interpretation Machiavelli's originality lies in the addition to the humanist reliance on the ruler's rhetorical skill something even more necessary for the maintenance of power: military force. As Skinner argues, Machiavelli challenges his own humanist heritage in denouncing the humanists' failure to emphasize the significance of sheer power in political life. They basically misunderstood the scope of necessity.¹⁷⁸ For Machiavelli, according to this reading, princes and republics set the same fundamental practical end: the preservation and stability of the state, or else the collectivity; and the necessary 'virtues' toward this end cannot always be consonant with Christian or civic humanist virtues, although he does not preach abandoning conventional moral norms in general. What he actually preaches is that understanding the scope of necessity entails an understanding of politics as the art of what is practically possible and what means can be used in order to achieve it. According to this kind of Machiavellian realism the separation of politics and ethics is not a normative assumption, but it is a practical acknowledgement that effectiveness requires from political agents the abandoning of moral consistency in different spheres of action.

Nevertheless, this kind of Machiavellian republicanism does not seem to be so far away from the first, 'amoral' reading of his works. It is true that with the arrival of Christianity eternal happiness (salvation) became a spiritual and private matter and politics could only become more pragmatic and separated from ethical considerations. When the moral ends are set within another world, the community as a political body only aspires to preservation and the moral integrity of its rulers becomes irrelevant. The patriotic necessities are thus hardly ethical because the main target is the physical preservation of the community, which in turn means giving priority to strong rulership, not the community's way of life in the Aristotelian sense. This kind of ethically impassive republicanism demotes political reason to mere calculation. The 'reason of state' may assert here some basic patriotic principles only to reduce them later into

¹⁷⁷ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 122-123.

¹⁷⁸ Skinner, *The Foundations*, Vol. 1, 129.

political utility, irrelevant to what is considered as conventional virtue. It is this irrelevance that leads to moral and political degeneration, because when conventional virtues are not connected to political conduct there are no standards, apart from utility, by which a community can judge its political leadership. This is why we end up with conceptions of 'politics as a morally perilous arena for action.'¹⁷⁹

D) Pagan against Christian ethics: A second traditional interpretation (variation two of Machiavelli's false Republicanism)

Isaiah Berlin is the major proponent of the second variation of Machiavellian republicanism, which, this time, rejects the separation between politics and ethics. Berlin agrees with the view that Machiavelli is not a systematic moralist and that he merely wishes to write about government affairs and the general practical purposes of every political community. He also agrees that the Florentine theorist did not idealise human nature. Berlin corroborates the 'Machiavellian' reading according to which men appear to care little for liberty and they place it well below security, property or desire for revenge. In the same line of argument, society is, normally, a battlefield in which there are conflicts between and within groups. These conflicts can be controlled only by the judicious use of both persuasion and force. 'What is certain is that unless there is a firm hand at the helm, the ship of the state will founder'.¹⁸⁰ In *The Discourses* Machiavelli argues that the ideal state is a republican state where the citizens are morally equal to their rulers and politically capable toward the promotion of the glory of their community. However, there are situations in which a strong prince is preferable to a weak republic. According to Berlin, Aristotle and the later Stoics would have endorsed all this; but from the fact that there is such a thing as an art of government, indispensable to the attainment of goals that men in fact seek, it does not follow that Machiavelli did not care to what uses it was applied, and merely produced a handbook of scientific political 'directives' that was morally neutral.¹⁸¹

For Berlin, Machiavelli's aim is a good society that enjoys stability, internal harmony, security, justice and a sense of power and of splendour. His republicanism is not devoid of ethical objectives, because the *amoral* approach would not make his theory so original, or even philosophically ambiguous. His problem is how can men

¹⁷⁹ Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics*, 106.

¹⁸⁰ Berlin, *Against the Current*, 40-41.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

achieve those goals and what faculties do they have to develop in a Christian world? The answer seems to be that men should invent some measures that will sustain and entrench those necessary faculties that will lead to a healthy society. Those measures though, are an offence against the contemporary (Christian) morality; so the major question is in what sense can those measures be said to be justified? For Berlin this is the central point of Machiavelli's entire conception with regard to politics and ethics;¹⁸² the moral justification of the political community after fifteen hundred years under the dominant Christian morality. In one sense those measures can be justified and in another they cannot; and these senses must be distinguished more clearly than Machiavelli found it necessary to do. This does not mean that Machiavelli divided politics from morals. 'Machiavelli dwells with passionate intensity on the conflict between the commitments and obligations of a responsible political leader and the commitments and obligations of the prevailing Christian morality of his time.'¹⁸³

Thus, according to Berlin's famous interpretation, Machiavelli does not specifically distinguish morals from political and amoral values. What he institutes is something even more revolutionary for his time: a differentiation between two incompatible ideals of life, and therefore two moralities. One is the morality of the pagan world and against this moral universe stands first and foremost Christian morality itself.¹⁸⁴ He argues that it is in fact impossible to combine Christian virtues with a satisfactory, stable, vigorous and strong society on earth. Consequently a man must choose; and to choose a Christian life is to condemn oneself to political impotence.¹⁸⁵ The difficulty of making this choice reminds us of a major philosophical problem in relation to political action: Plato's principle of specialisation as the only way to defeat the morally destructive fragmentation of social roles that depicts the variety of the conceptions of the good that human beings have. In this reading, Hampshire argues, Machiavelli believes that a 'weak and philosophically confused person cannot understand that every kind of human excellence comes from a strong concentration of energies and that it always has its consequent cost. Such a person dissipates his energies and falls short of any form of human excellence. All virtue, like all genuine learning, results from a specialisation of human powers.'¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² Ibid., 44.

¹⁸³ Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 163-164.

¹⁸⁴ Berlin, *Against the Current*, 45.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 46-47.

¹⁸⁶ Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 165.

Berlin speaks of different ethical traditions i.e. the Christian or Kantian tradition, the Stoics, or even some types of utilitarian ethics. But he insists that there exists an equally time-honoured ethics, that of the Greek *polis*, of which Aristotle provided the clearest exposition, as discussed above. Since men are beings made by nature to live in communities, their communal purposes are the ultimate values from which the rest are derived. Ethics so conceived –the code of conduct, or the ideal to be pursued by the individual– cannot be known save by understanding the purpose and the character of the *polis*. This is the kind of pre-Christian morality which, according to Berlin, Machiavelli takes for granted, and entails a conception of the good that is far more widespread and influential than is generally acknowledged in books on moral philosophy. In this conception, the most evident form of greatness is supreme political power, the power of a successful statesman.¹⁸⁷ Thus, when Benedetto Croce says ‘that Machiavelli discovered the necessity and the autonomy of politics, politics which is beyond good and evil’, Berlin responds ‘[b]eyond good and evil in some non-Aristotelian, religious or liberal-Kantian sense; but not beyond good and evil of those communities, ancient or modern, whose sacred values are social through and through.’¹⁸⁸ Machiavelli seems to offer here an elaborate and adjusted version of Aristotle’s political ethics. ‘Hence in opposing the “laws of politics” to “good and evil” Machiavelli is not contrasting two “autonomous” spheres of acting –the “political” and the “moral”, because those two can never be separated: he is contrasting his own political ethics to another conception of it which governs the lives of persons who are not of any interest to him.’ He is indeed rejecting Christian ethics, but in favour of another system, another moral universe; he opts for a rival (Roman or classical) morality, an alternative realm of ends. In other words the conflict is between two moralities, Christian and pagan, not between autonomous realms of morals and politics.¹⁸⁹

For Berlin the originality and the tragic implications of Machiavelli’s thesis reside in their relation to a Christian civilization. To preach what Machiavelli preached during the climax of the age of Christianity and to be forcing men to make a conscious and painful choice between two entirely different worlds, like he did, is not an achievement to be easily outrun. In choosing the life of a statesman, or even the life of a citizen with enough civic sense to want your state to be as successful and as splendid as possible, you commit yourself to rejection of Christian integrity. It may be that

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Berlin, *Against the Current*. 53.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 54.

Christians are right about the well-being of the individual soul, taken outside the social or political context. But the well-being of the state is not the same as the well being of the individual – they ‘are governed in a different way’.¹⁹⁰

Machiavelli was not, of course, the first who effectively managed to express – and eventually accept as an inherent feature of social life– the corrupting effects of politics on moral character. Choosing the Christian life, which entails political impotence, is reminiscent of Socrates’ choice to listen to his *daimonia* instead of committing political injustices. The difference is that in Machiavelli’s time, the problem of moral integrity was not related to reasonable conduct within both the private and the public spheres, as it was the case with Plato and Aristotle’s conceptions of virtue; instead it is related to fulfilling Christian commands regardless of the circumstances. Both accounts of private virtue require a moral consistency which cannot be compatible with the demands of politics. However, whereas the classical account proposes a new conception of politics which will be in harmony with reason, the Christian account proposes a conception of politics separated from moral considerations. This account, naturally, can only be based on a consequentialist reasoning.

Nevertheless, it was made clear by both Plato and Aristotle that the reconciliation of private virtue and political justice, of the particular and the universal, could not be reduced to consequentialist principles. A strongly contextual republicanism, which is based on utilitarian principles of physical survival, is doomed to become unethical and thus to degenerate into political amorality. Machiavelli must have understood the dangers of this republican ethical void because of his political experience and his academic relationship with the ancients. However, for Berlin, Machiavelli was the first to recognize the moral problem in terms of incommensurable ethical values; the problem was no longer how to resolve the tension between private and public virtue so as to get closer to justice, but to choose a way of life amongst a pluralism of values which cannot be reduced to any primary moral principles. Empirical knowledge only allowed for such a relative conclusion. In the context of this pluralism, the unity, or at least interdependence, of politics and ethics is restored only within a specific set of values, but rejected as a universally accepted ethical objective. The reconciliation between the particular and the universal is not simply rejected, but disregarded as irrelevant.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 64.

The above approach to Machiavelli's republicanism (with its two variations) can, I think, be understood better when we try to answer the famous Machiavellian question how 'the ends justify the means?' According to the first more unethical variation we should understand the maxim like this: for Machiavelli, 'Humans, in always judging particular actions in the circumstances and men's characters by appearances, have no access to an agent's intentions or higher reasons: they show themselves to be consequentialists. The end does not *justify* the means; they have no access to the means which may have been many and various, and only see the end, judging it against what appears to be their self-interest... judgment is always of appearances.'¹⁹¹ But having no access to the means is equivalent to saying that "the ends justify the means" because no ethical standards –apart from utility– can be used in order to judge political action. This is an understanding that sets the ends of the state as the integrity of a historic territory and security of its population.¹⁹² This integrity is defined as long-lasting power which would allow the realization of those republican, very practical, ends.¹⁹³ Here the 'reason of state' is not amoral, but its ethics is autonomous and judged by its own standards. This is why the passive citizens or the people of a community cannot have access to the means and can only evaluate practical results. These results might be achieved more easily by either a prince or a republic; this does not matter morally.

The second variation of Machiavelli's republicanism understands justifying ends as those that are appropriate to the security and virtue of the republics and their citizens,¹⁹⁴ as juxtaposed to Christian otherworldly moral ends. This may be considered as a kind of more principled republicanism, according to which so far as security and civic spirit are satisfied the ethical benchmark for the justification of unethical conduct –in Christian terms– has been fulfilled.¹⁹⁵ Here the ethics of the state is not autonomous but it presupposes a distinction between different ways of life, equally valued in moral terms and politically incompatible. The citizens or people may have access to the means but only when they consciously choose to reject the a-political way of life and understand the ethical value of their lives as teleologically defined by their community. This teleology is not of course Aristotelian in the sense that it derives from a naturalistic universal explanation of the human beings' purposes. The end of ethics is the

¹⁹¹ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought*, Vol. 2, 262-263.

¹⁹² Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 325.

¹⁹³ Wootton, *ibid.*, xxii.

¹⁹⁴ Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 325.

¹⁹⁵ Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current*, 45.

community itself, but its members do not relate to this end based on a persuasive and self-reflective ontological reason. Machiavelli explains how this end can be fulfilled by either a principality or a republic, though he does make clear that, morally, the republic is superior since it allows more of its members to understand the practical and moral purposes of the community.

In the final analysis, the two variations of this interpretation converge to an understanding of ‘the ends that justify the means’ as having defined a set of practical ends, i.e. the ‘welfare of the patria’,¹⁹⁶ which are ethically overriding, meaning that virtue is recognized so long as it promotes the physical existence of the community. In the first version, the appearance of virtue is understood as the necessary political skill for the development of power; true virtue is only a natural projection of this power, not its essential prerequisite. It is true that power is not here perceived for its own sake –as in the amoral reading of Machiavelli–, but denying the possibility for a collectively established set of ethical criteria for political conduct –at least within the particular community– always comes with a danger of rulers abusing this power. Necessarily, then, the rejection of the interdependency of politics and ethics degrades the citizen-ruler relationship into a utilitarian one, where the utility of the practical ends is both decided and fulfilled by those who already wield power. Thus, the thin line that separates the “welfare of the patria” from the amoral dominion is obscured even more, usually in favour of those who are politically strong.

Berlin’s (and Hampshire’s) view, on the other hand, finds Machiavelli’s originality in preaching the necessity for the restoration of the unity of private and public virtue. However, this unity is, in this republican version of Machiavelli, not a universal ethical objective; instead it is the outcome of a choice between two opposing moral worlds. The problem of course remains: how can one justify this choice if there are no universal ethical standards against which it will be judged? In this reading, Machiavelli’s conception of the good rests on a profound respect for history as the only judge of political conduct and the only attainable transcendence of death.¹⁹⁷ Berlin’s interpretation, based on value pluralism, classifies Machiavelli in the Aristotelian republican tradition as opposed to Christian ethics. But he does not offer a solution to the problem that the Aristotelian normative teleological exegesis of human nature cannot be transcribed to a Renaissance theory as such. His answer is that of value pluralism, i.e. it is one thing to give political instructions in a world where man’s

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 57.

¹⁹⁷ Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 166.

definition as political animal is universally accepted, and it is another to give political advice where there is no universally accepted conception of the good. Thus, if there are no means to acquire cognitively a notion of what is a life worth pursuing in universally accepted ethical terms, political theory will always be in danger to be reduced into technical utilitarian guides. This may explain Machiavelli's ambiguity when read from a perspective that always aims at unitary explanations of morality. Plato's argument, for example, was exactly this: that any kind of value pluralism denies a stable point of reference for human conduct. This kind of ethical scepticism will inevitably degenerate first to consequentialism and eventually to political *amoralism*.

E) Machiavelli's moral politics: A third unconventional interpretation

The third traditional interpretation of Machiavelli's thought constitutes an answer, which is not widely accepted, to the above problem of the relationship between incompatible conceptions of the good and political expediency. This view attempts to find in his works the arguments against an ethical relativism which derives both from the separation of politics from ethics and from value pluralism. According to this approach, Machiavelli's purpose was the revival of politics grounded upon stable and universal ethical criteria. These criteria should not necessarily be derived from ancient concepts of ethics and politics directly, but their discovery could be based on a classical reasoning. In this argument, the importance he assigns to law and law-making, even under the form of extreme force,¹⁹⁸ against social degeneration and moral decay should indicate that his theory is strongly moral. The importance Machiavelli assigns to the founding of 'free orders' derives from his conceptions of free agency and free will, of which politics is a necessary feature.¹⁹⁹ Thus, Machiavelli speaks of lawgivers and reformers of public opinion as teachers and educators, something that brings him in line with Plato and Aristotle who spoke about philosopher-kings and statesmen educators respectively. He implicitly but continually speaks the language of virtue and explains the comprehensive transvaluation of ethical principles²⁰⁰ that took place while Christianity dominated the ancient world. He also demonstrates the interdependence of

¹⁹⁸ Nicolai Rubinstein, 'Renaissance and Counter-Renaissance: A new epoch: Machiavelli', in the *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450-1700*, J.H. Burns (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, (1991), 52.

¹⁹⁹ Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 254.

²⁰⁰ Moral transvaluation simply means here the inversion of value for certain ethical principles which might have been praised in ancient ethics but disapproved in the Christian world. Thus what might have been a virtue in antiquity it would have been a vice in Machiavelli's time, and vice versa.

political context and moral agency in an attempt to enable a better appreciation of the nature, limits and potential of moral integrity where politics is deeply corrupted. Eventually, even the arguments in favour of the ‘Machiavellian’ autonomous ‘reason of state’ acknowledge his general point that the assessment of political conduct should involve a set of virtue ethics.²⁰¹

The problem is of course to determine what kind of virtue ethics and what conception of the human good, if any, his political theory is grounded upon. The general consensus of most interpretations of Machiavelli’s works –not only of those presented previously– is that his aim was to demonstrate the relativity of evaluative judgments about politics and the conception, first presented by Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, that the only certainty in politics is power itself. In contrast to this understanding, the interpretation of Machiavelli as an ethical thinker proposes that he attempted to explain what must be done in order to philosophically establish an ethical benchmark for good politics. According to this view, the crux of the argument lies in his, sometimes implicit, points regarding the transvaluation of moral principles and virtues. Therefore, Machiavelli chose to use historical examples related to leadership in order to show that political success might sometimes seem to be a matter of fortune or cunning, but on closer inspection there are a few fundamental philosophical principles that are always behind it. These principles can only be extracted after a careful philosophical reading of history. This reading should reveal that what is considered as the human good throughout history is not as relative as it might appear at a first glance.

The examples on leadership are revealing because, according to Mark Philp, ‘[h]ow those who rule us conduct themselves has more than ordinary significance because of the power they exercise, and yet that experience of power can make it difficult to retain self-control and a sense of proportion to act responsibly... [thus] the more serious problem is that how one should act is often unclear’.²⁰² This understanding of morally responsible leadership implies that, for Machiavelli, judging political action required an Aristotelian version of practical wisdom as based on practical reasoning, i.e. the prudent man determines what is right to do, at the right time, in the given circumstances. However, as discussed previously, Aristotle’s account of practical wisdom was not determined by the variability of ethical and political values. In a similar line of reasoning, when Machiavelli argues about responsible leadership as

²⁰¹ Mark Philp, *Political Conduct*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London (2007), 13.

²⁰² Ibid., 12.

the ability make the right decisions within the given circumstances, he does not make a statement of moral relativism.²⁰³ Practical wisdom should always rely upon a set of normative ethical evaluations if it is to avoid being reduced to calculative reason. The main target of this interpretation of Machiavelli is to find what exactly those ethical evaluations are, given the fact that Aristotle's metaphysical biology cannot be the starting point for Machiavelli's own ethical purposes and, in the end, for his republicanism. In other words, it is one thing to sustain a concept of practical wisdom within the universally accepted communal point of reference, i.e. the *polis*; and it is quite a different thing to do the same in a Christian world as described previously.

According to this interpretation, Machiavelli's method of redefining ethical principles for good politics has many similar points with Socrates and Plato's method. In the same manner in which Plato attempted to rediscover lost moral principles for political action through the criticism against the corrupt Athenian democracy, Machiavelli tried to find a reliable system of evaluative judgments regarding politics, through uncovering how honest words often cover dishonest deeds, in both republics and principalities. The process of assessing political persuasions requires critical standards that would necessarily be juxtaposed, on the one hand, to moral relativism and political cynicism, and on the other to religious *a*-political precepts for moral agency. Plato's critique against the Athenian democracy and its demagogues constitutes the best guide against relativism and cynicism.²⁰⁴ Machiavelli added his own account with regard to the relationship between religion and politics.²⁰⁵

Erica Benner is the major proponent of the unconventional *moral interpretation* of Machiavelli's work. Her argument is that Machiavelli's –very philosophical– aim was to know how to wield a rhetoric that is persuasive yet non-corrupting.²⁰⁶ This interpretation requires that we see the covert meanings of his works which lie below the seemingly amoral political language and propositions for immoral practices. Thus, Machiavelli tried in fact to develop an ethics of self-responsibility which is based on the historical knowledge that humans seldom live to their highest moral standards, but they constantly employ them, which means that moral agency has intrinsic value for them. Therefore, the right method for finding the necessary ethical standards should be to study the historical examples of disordered conduct, and understand in what way,

²⁰³ Coleman, *A History of Political Thought*, Vol. 2, 248.

²⁰⁴ Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 26-27.

²⁰⁵ Recollect here Socrates' approach to the subject as discussed previously.

²⁰⁶ Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 38.

morally and politically, they were disordered, in order to be prepared and able to avoid them in the future.

The problem is of course how we can be certain that Machiavelli did not in fact refer to these examples of disordered action merely because he desired to show that there is nothing else but disordered action. According to Benner, Machiavelli belonged in the Socratic tradition, along with Xenophon, Plato and Thucydides, who, in their works, sometimes developed carefully hidden arguments purported to set out harsh truths to agents who were, on the one hand, corruptible and, on the other, free to fight against their own corruptibility. This method of constructive dissimulation²⁰⁷ conceived writing as a civil medicine which was targeted specifically against moral degeneration as the source of political insufficiency. According to this kind of reasoning, the cynical language in *The Prince* is not Machiavelli's own language, but his demonstration of how moral and political corruption are interrelated and mutually advancing. Thus *The Prince* was meant to be a lesson against moral and political corruption and Machiavelli's own warning to the citizens against the deceiving language of the rulers. Learning the way of the devil is useful not because it teaches humans how to follow it, but because it teaches them how to avoid it.²⁰⁸

Thus, according to this interpretation, the usual 'Machiavellian' distinction between virtue and political effectiveness appears to be too simplistic. Following the Platonic example, Machiavelli's education aims towards understanding what virtue is, before pursuing it. According to such an argument, the public good is not necessarily grounded upon evil, but it is based on capturing what constitutes evil and then fighting against it. In this sense, the moral transvaluation, which Machiavelli is famous for explaining, is not a prescription against conventional ethics –whether Christian or of any other kind– and in favour of practical political effectiveness. It is instead an attempt to analyze how those who wield political power use excuses of moral corruption from the citizens' part –usually based on the ontological Christian assumption that humans are by nature evil– in order to justify their own unethical conduct. Of course, this unethical conduct perpetuates political domination.

Therefore, in Benner's interpretation, Machiavelli understood the fundamental reasons that lead to moral and political corruption. He also accepted the fact that this corruption was so advanced that it had brought a transvaluation of moral virtues and principles; and so he proposed that two possible solutions are available: first, opting out

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 70-71.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 61-62.

of civil life altogether (the Socratic conclusion in the *Apology*); and second, finding unusual ways to reason with fellow citizens and leaders –who had already been affected by the transvaluation of virtues– in order to develop the necessary capacities for critical ethical judgments²⁰⁹ (what Socrates did in his real life). These ways of reasoning are unusual because Machiavelli had both to describe the transvaluation of virtues and principles so as to make it understandable, and to manage to persuade his readers against their own corruption (which was the natural outcome of this transvaluation). Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War intended to do the same thing with the corrupt Athenians. Machiavelli, therefore, according to Rousseau, 'sought to teach "great lessons to peoples" while "pretending to teach lessons to kings."' ²¹⁰ So, Benner argues, 'behind first appearances of amoral instrumentalism or even cynicism, he sets out strong reasons for people to adopt simple yet rigorous ethical standards that apply in external relations as well as in civil life.'²¹¹

This reasoning is of course strongly reminiscent of Plato's own thoughts about the nature of politics. According to the 'amoral interpretation' of Machiavelli, the famous concept of 'dirty hands' has its origins in the Machiavellian advice to princes to cultivate the appearance of morality, but never the actual practice of it: 'Therefore, a ruler who wishes to maintain his power must be prepared to act immorally when this becomes necessary [...] because circumstance do not permit living a completely virtuous life [...] because if one considers everything carefully, doing some things that seem virtuous may result in one's ruin[.]'²¹² However, as already mentioned, this is hardly original, because it is not different, at all, from the argument Adeimantus, and especially Glaucon, made in favour of the appearance of morality in the *Republic*: 'That is why I'll speak at some length in praise of the immoral life; by doing so, I'll be showing you the kind of rejoinder I want you to develop when you criticize immorality and commend morality.' And further down: 'The point is that everyone thinks the rewards of immorality far outweigh those of morality' (*Republic*, 358d and 360d). So, the 'ethical reading' proposes, Machiavelli does not prescribe the appearance of morality; he only explains how it is used by immoral agents.

Machiavelli's criticism against religion might then be explained by his reference to the ecclesiastical authorities as the best example of politically institutionalized moral hypocrisy. If religion is supposed to be the source of morality, then the actual conduct

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 64-65.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 486.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Machiavelli, *The Prince*, (1988), 55.

of the Christian church in his time must have been considered by him as the epitome of the appearance of morality covering a ruthless pursuit of power. Thus, in order to learn how not to be good, one needed only look at Christian religion as an organized political power. The Church would attempt to cover the worst unethical conduct under the pretences of the one and true morality. For Machiavelli, according to this interpretation, the Christian church offered an example of the purposeful concealment of the true relationship between politics and ethics. It was not a religious act, but a purely political one. True religion, on the other hand, is useful as a contributing factor to individual and social ethical completion. Because when a theoretical explanation on the interdependency between politics and ethics is deliberately beclouded; when there are no reliable ethical standards in the city; then invoking the 'power of the heaven' is the only refuge for a true moral judgment. Socrates' invoking of his own gods against the corrupt understanding of Athens' political religion is a similar example, in this instance, regarding the use of reason against moral confusion. Machiavelli's 'pious cruelty' is not an attack on religion in general, but an attack on arguments that use the concept of religion in order to avoid reasonable criticism. On the other hand, true belief in Christian principles may be the last refuge in case no other evaluative moral criteria are available. So, secular rationalists should recognize that concepts of the divine or supernatural are frequently used to express reasonable ethical judgements about human self-responsibility.²¹³

Still, in order to find this peculiar Machiavellian ethic, which is so strongly related to good politics, one must analyze and respond to the claims which are related to what is considered by the first two interpretative traditions as his weak philosophical points: his theory of knowledge and his conception of the human nature. Thus, if one must understand Machiavelli's ethics, one must answer some basic questions: Is it true that his intentions in studying history are confined in stressing the historical contextualism and thus relativism of what people judge as bad and good? Is it true that he does not explore the deep waters of philosophical anthropology and he is incurably sceptical about the possibility of human judgements on moral and political agency?²¹⁴ The conventional interpretations of Machiavelli find in his works an attempt to make clear, that humans can only acquire empirical knowledge and that this empirical knowledge reveals nothing more than the relativity of social orders. Even in Berlin's more principled version of Machiavelli's republicanism knowledge is limited to what

²¹³ Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 182, 184.

²¹⁴ Crick, *ibid.*, 51-53.

we learn from history with regard to creating and maintaining a well-governed state. Usually, it teaches us that in order to do that we have to transcend conventional moral rules.²¹⁵ In this sense, his criticism against the Christian church is merely another indicative description that purports to show that even this which should have been the embodiment of morality, is in reality nothing more than a façade for the undisturbed pursuit of political desires.

The interpretation of Machiavelli as an ethical philosopher must, therefore, be based on a rejection of these two basic arguments: first, the extreme form of skepticism that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish what deeds have genuine value from what appears falsely valuable or praiseworthy; and second, the reductive form of empiricism that subordinates ethical considerations to undeluded observations about what is or has been in the past.²¹⁶ Instead of this ‘Machiavellian’ reductive empiricism, Benner argues, there is a connecting thread in Machiavelli’s historical examples which indicates an attempt to find normative principles in order to fight what seems to be an incurable corruptibility of human moral standards.²¹⁷ Behind all these examples of disordered action and troubled communities there is a lesson against experience as the sole source of knowledge, because it can both be insufficient and misleading. The actual outcomes of historical actions do not tell us the whole truth about human agency. There are reasons and principles to be found, which would explain those outcomes in ethical, ontological terms. This is a more genuine Aristotelian reading of Machiavelli’s works in the sense that his study of the human nature should lead to normative reasonings about dispositions, capacities and desires that he sees as unchanging in the human species.²¹⁸ These reasonings should then allow the discovery of some actions or principles that have being perennially ethically praised, or criticized, by humans and thus must have some intrinsic positive or negative value, not influenced by chronological or topical considerations. These are the principles on which politics must be grounded upon in order to be both successful and ethically meaningful.

MacIntyre, although overall not a proponent of such an interpretation of Machiavelli, is here corroborating this reading of his works with regard to human nature:

²¹⁵ Berlin, *Against the Current*, 39, 43.

²¹⁶ Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics*, 124.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

Finally there is a lesson to be learned from Machiavelli's example as much as from his explicit teaching. In periods in which the social order is relatively stable all moral questions can be raised from within the context of the norms which the community shares; in periods of instability it is these norms themselves which are questioned and tested against the criteria of human desires and needs [...] Living in an age of flux, Machiavelli's understood the transience of political orders, and it is this which in one way makes his appeal to the human nature so striking. For the counterpart to a belief in the transience of political and social orders might easily not have been a belief in a timeless human nature with permanent needs against which these orders can be measured and in terms of which they can be explained.²¹⁹

In this sense, Machiavelli is indeed more philosophical than it is usually thought. His historical examples essentially offer a guide on the basic characteristics of human nature as a benchmark for assessing moral and political agency. Why would he argue in favour of a political and amoral utilitarianism, when in reality he attempted to find a stable point of reference against the transience of social and political orders? A universal definition of human nature, whether negative or positive, could only work, for Machiavelli, as the starting point of a political philosophy, whose aims transcend the simple description of bad political reality. What constitutes the religious argument that Machiavelli exposes, analyzes and finally criticizes, but certainly does not prescribe, is the acceptance of the corruptibility of the human disposition as unchangeable, and its consequent political *amoralism*. When Machiavelli *dissimulates*²²⁰ about justice by referring to Thucydides' texts, he wishes to reveal the transvaluation of ethical virtues under the pressure of war and civil war, and the difficulties that the citizens face in making political judgments where ethical standards are corrupt.²²¹ This is a corruption for which the responsibility lies in the hands of both the leaders of a community and its people.

According to Benner, Machiavelli does not deny the corruptibility of human nature as such. But the philosophical remarks in the historical examples he cites amount to a view of human nature as prone to both bad and good actions. This, in combination with the importance he assigns to laws as the basis for a well-ordered

²¹⁹ MacIntyre, *A short History of Ethics*, 125.

²²⁰ 'Constructive dissimulation' or 'writing as civil medicine' is the term Benner uses when classifies Machiavelli within the ancient tradition of Socrates, Xenophon, Thucydides etc., whose central aim was 'to instruct readers how to see through misleading political appearances.' The main purpose of dissimulation was 'to teach boys and practical men by works that "imitate" the misleading appearances seen in the public realm. Thus, attentive readers would learn how these phenomena are generated, and become better equipped to avoid traps set for them by demagogues'. See Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 64-65.

²²¹ Ibid., 88.

society, should lead to his implicit, but central, point throughout his works that the human capacities to order laws can always be used to turn the badness of human nature into goodness.²²² What is then this ‘true knowledge’ which is inferred from the reasonable examination of history and what are the moral and political truths which good politics can be grounded upon?²²³ Here, Thucydides’ teachings offer again the guiding principles: Nicias’ argument against the Athenian expedition to Sicily uncovers what is for Machiavelli the basis of true ethics and good politics; that is, it is the height of imprudence to try to take what you cannot hold.²²⁴ Xenophon and Plutarch’s histories, as well, if correctly read, strongly recommend that behind every great political failure lies an action of self-assertion which seems to be violating some basic human conceptions about the good life.

If this was indeed Machiavelli’s central ethical argument, then we face a stark contrast between the previous two interpretations and the latter more ethical reading of his works. The fundamental Machiavellian triptych on virtue, necessity and fortune is now understood in completely different terms. Whereas for both the amoral and the republican interpretations *virtú* is literally taken to be meaning manliness, with its characteristics of self-assertion and lack of moderation, which are essential when facing necessity and fortune, for the ethical interpretation of Machiavelli, such an exposition of *virtú* could only be ironic. Because, according to Benner, what we can understand from Machiavelli’s implicit points, is that the relationship between *virtú* and *necessità* is in reality the exact opposite:

Necessity is useful when agents see it as self-imposed and freely accepted. But it is very dangerous when they see it as imposed from without, since people grow more obstinate in their resistance when necessity is forced upon them by others [...] The distinction between removing and imposing necessities related in the following way to the differences between more and less responsible actions. Irresponsible agents may think that the only way to deal with enemies is to eliminate them with violence. Responsible agents know that unilateral and immoderate measures might eliminate some enemies, while creating many more. Irresponsible agents endorse ruthlessness toward enemies because they view conflicts only from their own perspective.²²⁵

²²² Ibid., 190-191.

²²³ Ibid., 30.

²²⁴ Ibid., 96-97.

²²⁵ Ibid., 148.

Therefore, on the one hand, we have the Machiavellian necessity conceived as an obstacle to physical domination, self-preservation and self-assertion –which are commonly considered as amoral ends– where ‘[t]he classical ideal of self-control is dismissed with a shrug’²²⁶ and virtue is only a calculative ability; and on the other hand, we have a strong and positive dialectical relationship between necessity and virtue, where *virtú* is understood as reflective prudence, which allows the moral agents to conceive *necessità* as prudent self-restraint and responsibility.²²⁷ Self-ordering or imposing laws on one’s self is thus the necessary political action before ethical completion.

The other element of the triptych, i.e. fortune, also reveals the difference in understanding the concept of ethical and political conduct between Machiavelli’s divergent interpretations. The amoral and patriotic readings of his works are similar in explaining fortune as the female equivalent of *virtú*’s manliness. Thus, force and abruptness are necessary in order to face the contingencies of politics. The virtuous agents will be able to resist fortune and become politically successful because they have the capacity to respond swiftly and cunningly to any unexpected circumstances.²²⁸ Only the self-assertive strong man can conquer the capricious woman. Thus, both fortune and necessity are interrelated to *virtú* in a negative manner, that is, they constitute its obstacles which must be overcome by any means necessary.

Opposite to this understanding is the interpretation that wants Machiavelli’s conceptions of *virtú* and fortune as antithetical forms of causation. This is a logical consequence of the interdependent relationship between *virtú* and necessity, which signifies the importance of self-reliance, independence and self-restraint of the moral agent. Fortune, unlike the self-imposed necessity, is related with causal resources that are not an agent’s own. ‘Whenever he describes an individual or city as “fortunate”, Machiavelli implies that it relies too much on something other than its own virtue [...] Machiavelli repeatedly insists that agents must choose which kind of causation they want to rely on most.’²²⁹ It is here once again maintained that the historical examples, Machiavelli supposedly used as guides for effective political conduct, are not in reality offering models for imitation, but the exact opposite. Agents who in the past relied too much on fortune and superficially exploited the ‘extraordinary situations’ in order to

²²⁶ Quentin Skinner, ‘introduction’ in Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1988), xxii.

²²⁷ Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics*, 150-151.

²²⁸ Crick, *ibid*, 5, 8, and Quentin Skinner, ‘introduction’, xii.

²²⁹ Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics*, 167.

achieve glory, very rarely contributed significantly, in the long run, to the welfare of their communities.²³⁰ Machiavelli, does not, in effect, really propose to current leaders to imitate those agents who acted in a self-assertive manner; instead he explains to them that if they do, they might achieve a temporary glory, but they will eventually fail because they would not have built their political order upon stable and clearly understood ethical values, of which good laws are the necessary complementary feature.²³¹

F) The transition to modernity and the creation of 'good orders': can ethics be the ground for politics?

In the last interpretation of Machiavelli's political works as fundamentally philosophical –in terms of proposing hardcore ethical values as the only sufficient basis for good politics– the so called necessary set of virtue ethics for the good judgment of political conduct seems to be revolving around the major classical virtue of self-control. One central question remains with regard to how this fundamental virtue is justified while grounded neither upon a classical teleology nor upon consequentialism. According to Benner's view, for Machiavelli, the lesson to be taught by most philosophical accounts of history is that along with the deficient moral nature of human beings, there is an equally fundamental and universal principle i.e. their desire for freedom. Understanding those two basic principles would allow the lawgiver or the reformer to create good orders.²³²

Empirical knowledge and non-empirical reasoning reveal two things: first, that relativism on the meaning of words and values leads to corruption; and second, that there is a perennial tendency to underestimate free agency, which is a basic moral fact

²³⁰ Ibid., 111.

²³¹ In Plato's *Crito*, Crito makes a similar argument with regard to the transvaluation of virtue and its relation to fortune. He reprimands Socrates about the manner he handled his trial in his attempt to persuade him to escape and save him from death: '[O]ne should choose just what a good and manly man would choose, particularly if one has claimed to care for virtue through his whole life. For my part I am ashamed for you and for us, your companions, that the whole affair concerning you will seem to have been conducted with certain lack of manliness on our part[.]' Socrates' reply indicates that the values which make up for moral integrity must remain always stable regardless of the circumstances and that manliness is the opposite to virtue because it expresses man's inability to stay within reason: 'I, not now but always, am such as to obey nothing else of what is mine than that argument which appears best to me upon reasoning. The arguments that I spoke in the past I am not able to throw out now that this fortune has come to pass for me. Instead, they appear rather alike to me, and I venerate and honor the same ones I did before.' Plato, *Crito*, 45d-46b. Personal virtue is conceived here as inseparable from public law and Socrates proposes that one must defend high standards of conduct even in conditions of personal danger, if one wants both to achieve eternal glory and really contribute to the welfare of his community.

²³² Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 226.

or a “reasonable necessity”.²³³ Every politician must, therefore, act on the normative assumption that every human being has a concept of free agency which must be respected as a fundamental ethical reason in one’s life. This in turn means that it is a basic human power to give or withhold authority, and so, Benner argues, the desire to be treated as co-authors of the laws and orders one lives under is the bedrock of Machiavelli’s philosophical reasoning about freedom.²³⁴ The political argument that naturally follows, wants people to give accounts of their actions to others, because free will does not necessarily entail good exercise of it. This is why the classical central virtue of self-control is of such importance: free will demands self-responsibility;²³⁵ the moral principle is only realized through a political concept.

This connection of ethics and politics goes against an understanding of Machiavelli as an amoral political advisor and, partly, against him as a devoted republican who recognized the conflict between different conceptions of the good. Where people, individually or collectively, set their practical ends and use whatever necessary means to achieve them, they have seldom seen their self-assertion being respected and glorified in the long run. On the other hand, people who assert their capacity for free action and at the same time understand the huge responsibility such an assertion entails are inherently worthy of respect.²³⁶ Thus whether we talk about principalities or republics, the fundamental principle of exercising free will demands the willing authorization as the foundation of free orders. Therefore, the political end is not here the community itself –in a physical sense which goes beyond ontological assumptions about human nature and thus rejects the universal ethical significance of politics. Instead the political end is to cultivate every agent’s ability to set limits to their freedom; limits that every agent will consider as legitimate.

Politics must found the people’s power on stable ethical principles in order to reproduce and maintain it in the long term.²³⁷ The ethical principle derives from the ethical demands that human beings place on themselves. And what human beings mostly demand, according to all historical examples, is that they have the ability to exercise their free will. This is the fundamental criterion behind Machiavelli’s set of virtue ethics which constitutes the benchmark for political conduct. Free will is a

²³³ Ibid., 496.

²³⁴ Ibid., 247. Whether this was indeed Machiavelli’s philosophical argument –against most traditional interpretations– is a debate that cannot be fully developed and resolved here. In any case, Benner’s argument is useful, since it reveals the variety of analytical explanations that Machiavelli’s works can sustain regarding the relationship between politics and ethics.

²³⁵ Ibid., 251.

²³⁶ Ibid., 256.

²³⁷ Ibid., 259.

presupposition of virtue, but it is not virtue itself. Virtue requires the ability to constrain free will, and in an Aristotelian note, the good practical judgement heavily depends on this ability. In addition, it might be limited by circumstances, or fortune, but in the end free will cannot be ruled out because of fortune.²³⁸

In the same manner Aristotle argued that, in final analysis, responsibility for moral and political agency lies with the individual irrespective of the circumstances and the social context within which the individual acts. In a few words, the amoral conception of free will understands free agency as unlimited and irresponsible self-assertion based on power, whereas the ethical conception of free will understands free agency under the “laws” of self-restraint. In the first conception free agency will be naturally heavily depended on fortune, whereas in the second conception circumstances are irrelevant to one’s ability to be self-responsible (they might change the actual outcome of one’s conduct but not its ethical premises). For Machiavelli self-restraint was a prerequisite for freedom, as for Plato self-discipline was a prerequisite for happiness.

The view on Machiavelli’s non-philosophical republicanism analyzed above conceives politics as a necessary evil based on the assumption that since we cannot change human nature all we are left with is force. Berlin, as well, understands the difficulty of uniting politics and ethics when there are no ethical ultimate ends in the Aristotelian sense.²³⁹ In Benner’s reading, on the other hand, Machiavelli offers a strongly ethical argument about politics; i.e. ‘however bad the natural conditions of a site or the natural humors found in men, human capacities to “order laws” can always be used to turn these toward good than bad.’²⁴⁰ Thus, the moral explanation of Machiavelli’s republicanism is based on the classical ancient conception of law as the sole criterion which makes it easy to distinguish between an ochlocracy and a republic. Force derives thus from man’s virtue in ‘ordering laws’. In the same line of reasoning, the only pessimism or realism in his political philosophy derives from his description of virtue as self-critical prudence.²⁴¹ So, Benner argues, ‘On philosophical reflection the highest possible standards may turn out to be less elevated than many people supposed.’²⁴² Neither Aristotle nor Machiavelli argued that this kind of human moral development is easy. But, like Plato first realized, the hard reality of politics as a field

²³⁸ Ibid., 172-173.

²³⁹ Berlin, *Against the Current*, 51, 53.

²⁴⁰ Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics*, 191.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 192, 194.

²⁴² Ibid., 493.

where power expunges morality from people's considerations does not suggest that people abandon politics, or worse that they learn how to become immoral; instead it invites people to self-reflect and find ways to change politics and thus improve their lives.

In summary, Benner's view about Machiavelli's political philosophy, proposes an argument according to which the innate capacities of human beings for free agency, along with their imperfect moral natures, constitute the basis for political ordering. Legitimate authority depends on acts of consent, not on the quality of orders irrespective of how they are established, i.e. the ends do not justify the means under any circumstances. Thus, Hampshire here agrees, the answer to Machiavelli's problem may be that there is a recognisable basic level of common decency, which he explains as procedural justice, and that even in weighing in, politically, conflicting moral claims and competing conceptions of the good this level of common decency can never be violated.²⁴³ The interdependency of politics and ethics is therefore inferred by Machiavelli from the fact that the ethical value of exercising free-will must translate into the general principle of authorization; i.e. always seek consent and consultation, regardless of the relative power of agents and subjects. Thus, readings of Machiavelli that reduce popular desires for freedom to 'private' purely self-interested desires for security can be rejected based on three observations derived from the basic principles exposed above: first, security and liberty are something wider than private interest; second, security must be related to the above concept of human freedom, and not to mere physical survival or particular property rights; and third, that free agency entails substantive powers and possibilities for human action.²⁴⁴ Natural desires for security can only be satisfied by 'making laws and orders' based on the fact that freedom is both valued subjectively and objectively.²⁴⁵

Thus, the "means" cannot be justified when they disregard the value of free agency, and if Machiavelli is in some respect a republican, this must be because he would prefer a city where self-reflection about the value of freedom is a collective, rather than a limited to an individual or ruling class, characteristic. A republic can be politically more successful because it makes easier for its members to understand the ethical significance of both the state and of their own reasons for participating in its actions. They can think of their own freedom as intrinsically valuable and thus never let

²⁴³ Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 186.

²⁴⁴ Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 261-263.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.

anyone take it away. This is why where the establishment and the maintenance of clear and collectively recognized ethical criteria are easier, good politics is a necessary development: respect for free agency guarantees political success. This constitutes an ethical guide for both the internal and external relations of a political community. It is therefore not true that Machiavelli develops two sets of moral values: one for the relations between states and one for dealing with one's fellow citizens.²⁴⁶ Free agency is the universal principle which must constitute the basic criterion of good political conduct.

In conclusion, this understanding of Machiavelli proposes a different approach to the contemporarily much debated subject of role-related virtue. The supposed separation between politics and ethics brought with it the radical argument in the Renaissance that virtue is role-specific and that we need different set of moral values for each sphere of conduct: 'Virtuous soldiers are strong and brave, virtuous generals intelligent and determined. The virtuous man is the man who has those qualities that lead to success in his chosen activity. The virtuous man will know when to seize his chances and will recognize what needs to be done.'²⁴⁷ The modern argument on role-specific virtue derives essentially from the previously examined Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of virtue but without its teleological, ethically normative and universal purposes. For, if success in a chosen activity is measured by the ethical aims of humanity as such, then virtue is both role-specific and, more importantly, universally defined.²⁴⁸ If success in a chosen activity is only measured against the arbitrary standards that the activity itself creates, then virtue is indeed role-specific but devoid of any ethical importance beyond the activity itself.

In this last ethical understanding' of Machiavelli, his originality does not derive from his rejection of the unity of virtues and the separation of politics from ethics, but from his attempt to restore this unity based on a newly defined concept of free agency. This concept of free agency is the only way to ensure the interdependence of politics and ethics, in a relationship where the rule of law takes priority over the –generally outlined by the mainstream republican interpretation– public good.²⁴⁹ In this sense, Machiavelli was indeed a radical thinker and one of the originators of Modernity. Virtue is here role-specific as far as success within a chosen activity is concerned (subjectively), but it is also universally determined as far as this activity promotes free-

²⁴⁶ Wootton, *ibid.*, xxii.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, xxix.

²⁴⁸ See Plato's role-related virtue as a realization of universal and unchanging morality.

²⁴⁹ Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 286.

will and its 'alter ego' i.e. self-responsibility; expressing thus an individualism that can only be understood ethically through politics.

Whether this argument signifies, according to Benner, a transition from virtue ethics (unreliable in the long term, but still indispensable as an evaluative tool for political conduct) to deontological reasoning (where prudence can only be sustained if procedurally guided)²⁵⁰ needs not to be concluded presently. However, this interpretation does offer a consistent answer to problems raised from different ethical traditions regarding the relationship between politics and morality in Machiavelli's works. First, the ethical reading of Machiavelli's theories goes against the tradition of 'civic humanism', because it understands the intrinsic ethical significance of the individual as the end of politics. Thus, free-agency takes priority over political freedom as we mean it in a patriotic sense.²⁵¹ Second, Machiavelli's ethical objectivism does not need consequentialism in order to make politics comprehensible. Against all those who see in his works an amoral political thinker whose only evaluative shelter is utilitarianism, this reading conceives the bedrock of his reasonings as obligations that should hold irrespective of anticipated actual results.²⁵²

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 289.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 294.

²⁵² Ibid., 496.

4. Weber's Fragmentation of Value:

Political Responsibility in a World Without Symbolic References

A) *Transition to modernity: The variety of conditions of existence and political organization*

Given the appropriate level of philosophical reconstruction, some of the problems Plato, Aristotle and Machiavelli attempted to tackle were essentially similar, despite the contextual differences which determined the form and essence of their works. Those problems have been generally defined, in this exposition, around the relationship between politics and ethics and the philosophical but also practical difficulties that this relationship entails. Machiavelli, regardless of what is the final interpretation of his work, concentrates all the characteristic and controversial features of this relationship. Irrespective of what he truly believed or preached, his work marked the difference between classical and modern political philosophy: that successful political conduct depends on a new understanding of morality which is now understood through the central dilemmas that the exercise of power poses. For the ancients virtue or rightness in action was something good in itself; thus the unification of ethics and politics should be explicated and conceived as a natural phenomenon. For the moderns, the arrival of Christianity has brought a new set of imperatives in ethical life in the form of obligations (deriving from obligations to God). These obligations usually dictated the separation of politics from ethics.²⁵³ Whether Machiavelli further endorsed this separation or not is a matter of debate currently. In any case, his work offers the analytical tools to understanding the transition from this conception of classical virtue to a different one; i.e. the modern conception of virtue as a dictate of an imperative reason which might at times (more often than not) be in conflict with the moral demands of politics.

Therefore, we have the classical rational way to true happiness of which politics is indispensable; the authoritative prescriptions of Christian reason which might be incompatible to politics; and, as a result, the need to discover a stable ethical value that will work against the resulted destructive pluralism in political matters. It has been

²⁵³ John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London (2000), 1-2.

shown in the Machiavellian analysis that the answer to this pluralism is either a form of political consequentialism (against the unity of politics and ethics) or the hypothesis that politics should be grounded upon a stable ethical value or some kind of basic justice. The next obvious question is to ask how one can utilize Machiavelli's 'unsurpassed account of the salient conditions of political life'²⁵⁴ and move from the classical approach to ethical problems of political philosophy to a more contemporary perspective of the relationship between politics and morality. A key figure in this transition is Max Weber. Weber's political thought has a peculiar form, in the sense that his work is sociologically oriented and thus his political terminology seems sometimes to derive from strict sociological categorizations, without the evaluative connotations which political philosophy is usually struggling with. Thus, 'The importance and originality of Weber's political thought have at times been obscured by commentaries which have presented his work as a relatively straightforward contribution to a version of modern social science which eschews political controversy.'²⁵⁵

However, this conception of politics, heavily based on sociological terminology, is far from meaning that Weber's political thought was restricted or reduced to sociological, scientific definitions of political action. In fact, Raymond Aron argues that Weber's own conception of the relation between science and politics constitutes the heart of his philosophical thought. 'For Weber was always passionately interested in the question: What is the ideal type of political man? The ideal type of the scientist? How can one be both a politician and a professor? The question was for him personal as well as philosophical.'²⁵⁶ This is, in a sense, reminiscent of Plato's own personal and philosophical struggle towards a science of politics which would not only offer the chance for an objective education in politics and morality, but also, and as a consequence, an opportunity for philosophers –the scientists of antiquity– to become good politicians. It is therefore a valid aim to reconstruct Weber's works within the tradition of political philosophy which originates in the political and ethical thought of the classical philosophers. This is a long and sophisticated tradition, something which cannot be said of the history of sociological theory. The focus of this tradition,

²⁵⁴ Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 163.

²⁵⁵ Peter Lassman, 'introduction' in *Weber's Political Writings*, Peter Lassman & Ronald Speirs (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1994), xi.

²⁵⁶ Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought Vol. 2*, Anchor Books, Garden City, New York (1970), 222.

according to Wilhelm Hennis, is on 'human nature and the process in which this nature is related with the social organization of life.'²⁵⁷

Hence, behind the massive quantity and variety of Weber's works on sociology, political economy and the cultural orientations of social structures, there is a central question, a main theme, which subtly unites all those different and diverse sociological topics under one ontological, or existential in Aron's words,²⁵⁸ aim: that is, the plurality of conditions in which humanity is self-organized, evaluates its own action and sets its ethical ends accordingly. This marks the transition from Machiavelli's ambiguity to the clearly articulated question that characterizes contemporary politics: it is not simply the Greek question of how to live, but the question of how to live with people who are of a different authoritative and salvationist religion.²⁵⁹ We must therefore not lose sight of the fact that Weber's aim is related to a concern with human beings and the quality of their existence (the political problem has always been *how to live*). This means that overall the different disciplines within which Weber developed his thought are overridden by a conception of political science which he understands in the classical sense.²⁶⁰ Hence, it is not strange that Weber's social theory revolves around 'higher' questions such as 'what relations do ethics and politics actually have? Have the two nothing whatever to do with one another, as has occasionally been said? Or, is the reverse true: that the ethic of political conduct is identical with that of any other conduct? Should it really matter so little for the ethical demands on politics that politics operates with very special means, namely, power backed up by *violence*?'²⁶¹

All these questions are conducive to the argument that 'Weber appears to stand at the end of a history of political science declining through the centuries from Plato to Aristotle, and at the beginning, as a stable point of departure, of all scientifically viable political science research.'²⁶² With Plato, Weber shares the concern about the necessity for political education as an indispensable feature of a vigorous society,²⁶³ because, he argues, 'it is precisely the vocation of our science to say things people do not like to

²⁵⁷ Keith Tribe, 'introduction' in Hennis, *Max Weber*, 14-15.

²⁵⁸ Aron, *Main Currents Vol. 2*, 220.

²⁵⁹ Rawls, *Lectures*, 8.

²⁶⁰ Lassman, *ibid.*, xi. What is meant here by referring to the classical sense of 'political science' is the philosopher's aspiration to develop accounts of political organization, which will be based on 'scientific' evidence (either empirical or theoretical it does not matter), as a way of resolving perennial, that is 'higher', existential problems for the human species. In a few words, the classical approach, of which Weber is part as is the argument here, faces all political questions with an attitude which is rather focused, philosophically, on the overall conditions and purpose of human existence and meaning.

²⁶¹ Max Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (eds.), Routledge, Oxon and New York (1998), 118-119.

²⁶² Hennis, *Max Weber*, 91.

²⁶³ Max Weber, *The Nation State and Economic Policy*, 27.

hear –to those above us, to those below us, and also to our own class.’²⁶⁴ He also shares the existential concern with regard to the possibility of politics as a science, or in other words, with the possibility of ever producing a stable and reliable guide so as to resolve the tensions between active and intellectual life. With Aristotle, Weber shares the same understanding of the significance that diversity has in analyzing and evaluating social and political life. Aristotle’s politics made the diversity of regimes of the Greek city-states intelligible, and through this diversity he attempted to pinpoint the objective ontological justifications of the ethical and political life of the *polis*. Weber’s political sociology is involved with the same kind of questions on ethical legitimacy within the context of a universal history which, nevertheless, reveals an irreducible pluralism of social life.²⁶⁵

With Machiavelli, finally, Weber shares an interest in the essence of political society because their own interest in public affairs and politics itself. ‘This is a breed of sociologists who are nostalgic for political action; Weber, like Machiavelli, is incontestably of this breed. He would have liked to engage in the political contest, to exercise power; he dreamed of being a statesman rather than a party leader’.²⁶⁶ Like Machiavelli, Weber conceived statesmanship as the virtue of first understanding and then reconciling the contradictory demands of politics and ethics. Successful political activity was, for both thinkers, a more complex concept than their initial analyses implied. This complexity could only be understood after the systematic explication of the causal relation between what humans consider as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and how far they are ready to go, practically, in order to achieve their ethical aims. At the end of the day, Weber is a political philosopher in the classical sense because his aim was to reveal the inner logic of human institutions.²⁶⁷ This logic he found to be hidden in the ethical self-evaluations of human beings, evaluations which –as history reveals to us– are the cause for the variety of forms of social organization. It also indicates, as Weber believed, the importance of the individual and its power to change the world through self-reflection, which results into a realist approach to political affairs.

Why and how, then, does Weber constitute the end of this classical line of political thought? He struggled with the old fundamental question those thinkers had struggled, i.e. ‘what is the best political order and its relation to the human character?’ And despite their different ontological and epistemological purposes and conceptions,

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 23.

²⁶⁵ Aron, *Main Currents Vol. 2*, 289.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 282.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 290.

he shared with Plato, Aristotle and Machiavelli a serious concern regarding the special ethical characteristics of political activity due to its direct and massive consequences on the quality of life of human beings. According to Hennis, Weber is the pivotal point in this tradition because he was the first who fully understood and studied all the fundamental ‘highest questions’, but at the same time he realized the necessity of abandoning not the questions themselves, but the desire for their permanent and universal answers. Hence, on the one hand, questions which cannot be answered with certainty are not ‘idle’ questions; they are essential, as well as our attempts to respond to them, which is what Weber attempted to do.²⁶⁸ On the other hand, the ‘highest questions’ cannot be comprehensively and consistently answered because Weber’s epistemology is based on an empirical demonstration that men have lived in different societies as a result of different beliefs.²⁶⁹ Weber’s diverse sociological works are consistently permeated by this search for the essence of humanity amidst an endless plurality of situations, both practically and ethically speaking. Their main, unifying theme is therefore the study of ‘the personality and the life orders’.²⁷⁰

The life orders, however, do possess a kind of inner regularity, an organized form of rationality that must be confronted by all who become involved in it. The tension between the regularities of these orders, ‘spheres’, ‘values’, [and] the fact that we ‘are placed into various life-spheres, each of which is governed by different laws’ [are] unavoidable. There is, however, a fundamental problem that is prior to these reciprocal tensions of the life orders: that *each* of these orders involves a demand, type, form, a variety of ‘impositions’ or perhaps opening-up of possibilities for future conduct, a formative tendency for ‘personality’.²⁷¹

The epistemological basis of Weber’s value pluralism can be sufficiently explained when juxtaposed to Plato’s own epistemological foundations of human activity and ethical purposes. Plato’s attack on moral relativism began from the assumption that political reality should correspond to an ideal Form which is unitary and resolves the problem of the variety of moral evaluations (and thus the practical paradoxes that those entail). The ideal Forms represented the perfect essence of reality, or reality as it should have been, had humans not being prevented from capturing it due to their limited capacities to philosophize. Plato proposed thus a way for humans to

²⁶⁸ Hennis, *Max Weber*, 61, 90-91.

²⁶⁹ Aron, *Main Currents Vol. 2*, 234.

²⁷⁰ Hennis, *Max Weber*, 70.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

expand their rational capacities and discover and apply the ideal Form and therefore redefine reality; his plan was extremely educational. Unfortunately, this solution presupposed that the ancient greek *polis* was a universal normative concept, i.e. Plato, and Aristotle after him, assumed that the ethical end is in one way or another derived from the form of the current social organization. Weber constructed his own understanding of value pluralism attempting to overcome this classical misconception, i.e. reality could not be limited to the temporal normative type of the greek *polis*, or to whichever is the dominant social paradigm. On the contrary, as Weber inferred from this classical misconception, it is unrealistic to attempt to grasp ethical aims in their totality and perfect essence based on social phenomena. History has taught us that we use ideal-types of social actions, formations or institutions as a way to distil their principal features and help us understand them more easily. They are a kind of yardstick against which we compare and evaluate empirical particular cases. Ideal types only approximate to social reality; they do not and cannot mirror it faithfully. Thus we cannot somehow capture the 'real essence' of social reality because social reality does not possess a 'real essence'. Instead, it is constantly reconstructed or represented in various different ways depending on the conceptual apparatus through which we view it in the first place.²⁷² The conceptual apparatus is determined by various factors of which the general mindset, lifestyle or culture of a society is the most significant.

The ideal type as a yardstick of evaluation remained of course a Platonic idea. Social reality that must be evaluated against its own 'real essence' was one of the first fundamental philosophical problems that Plato posed. However, in his philosophical account facts were directly related to values or ethical judgements in an essential manner and the true definition of facts was the sufficient requirement for holistic solutions to all problems at the political, social and symbolic level. On his part, although Weber accepted the universality and the perennial nature of those problems, he thought that their solutions are neither universal nor permanent. Every time, the solution will be a different one, depending on the particular evaluative context in which the problem is raised. At the outset of his philosophy of value pluralism he makes a radical distinction between facts and values which entails a fundamental difference between the order of science and the order of value.²⁷³ Thus the Platonic transition from the 'yardstick of evaluation' to the objective truth that politics must realize never takes place for Weber. If values and facts are distinguished then science and politics must be

²⁷² Frank Parkin, *Max Weber*, Rutledge, London and New York (2002), 28-29.

²⁷³ Aron, *Main Currents Vol. 2*, 250.

also distinguished. This does not mean that political science should not engage with existential and ethical questions; these are still there in, more or less, a similar form. It only means that political science should help us understand those questions; help us improve our lives upon this understanding; but abstain from imposing universal answers because there are none.

Weber affirmed the view that once the focus shifts to the variety of institutional forms, their types and sub-types and the equivalent pluralism of evaluations which lie behind those forms, a theoretical device such as the ideal-type is indispensable as a means of bringing some conceptual order to the chaos of reality. But this does not change the fact that ideal types are morally loaded constructs, and thus, scientifically speaking, they can only be relative types. So, social facts do not exist as things in their own right and accordingly they cannot be used normatively. What counts as a social fact is very much determined by the moral spectacles through which we view the world.²⁷⁴ Thus, according to Aron, when you read Max Weber, you have the impression of a humanity who continues to raise fundamental questions about the meaning and purposes of life, questions which have no logically imperative answer, but different meaningful answers, all equally valid ‘—though, to be on the safe side, let us say equally valid in terms of premises that are all hazardous or arbitrary.’²⁷⁵ However, despite his relativistic understanding of human history and, as a consequence, of the relationship between ethics and politics, Weber did not step away from seeking practical answers to the existential problems of humanity. This means, again, that we are placed on the most ancient ground of political science; ‘the mutual relation of “conditions of existence” (political in the older context, social in the modern) and the quality (“virtue”) of man [...] It should be read as “the science of the whole man”, countering a science of “constructed” and “unrealistic” beings, the “mathematical ideal model” of “abstract theory”’.²⁷⁶

This analysis of Weber’s epistemology, in combination with his existential concerns, once again raises the central paradox of political philosophy since Plato: how do we reconcile ethical relativism with universally legitimate ontological aims which usually entail particular forms of political practice? It is this opposition between Weber’s scientifically qualified value pluralism and his existential pursuits, which resulted into a new, modern conception of politics, despite Weber’s classical approach

²⁷⁴ Parkin, *Max Weber*, 30-31.

²⁷⁵ Aron, *Main Currents Vol. 2*, 271.

²⁷⁶ Hennis, *Max Weber*, 125-126.

to ‘political science’ as discussed above. This conception signified the transition from classical holistic accounts of political philosophy to the more contemporary approaches of politics as an autonomous ethical order. The problem of ‘virtue’ within an endless variety of ‘conditions of existence’ seems to be irresolvable and it is quite difficult to find a normative guide for action within such conditions. Weber’s thought was revolving around the fact that the primary point of ‘practical’, ‘moral’ and ‘social’ sciences is no longer the political community in the ancient sense.²⁷⁷ That is because the political community no longer existed. In addition, the fragmentation of value, or more correctly the realization of it, had lead to ‘the disenchantment of the world’. The realization of this ‘disenchantment’ meant that the traditional philosophical foundations of all political ideologies and doctrines were threatened by a relentless undermining of their own presuppositions.²⁷⁸

The outcome of this ‘disenchantment’ is Weber’s political realism. He says,

‘The final result of political action often, no, even regularly, stands in completely inadequate and often even paradoxical relation to its original meaning. This is fundamental to all history, a point not to be proved in detail here.’²⁷⁹

It should not come as a surprise then that Weber belonged in this school of modern thinkers who recognized that modernity brought along with enlightenment, reason, and science, the collapse of ultimate foundations –a collapse that makes politics in a secular, post-metaphysical age look tragically groundless and uncertain.²⁸⁰ Such an approach to politics and ethics compared to the normative tradition of political philosophy going back to Plato, does indeed seem to fall into a realist and descriptive strand of political sociology. Here, ‘The tensions and conflicts of the life orders become more intense, gain force, the more each is exposed to the ‘dictate of consequentiality’.²⁸¹ Nevertheless, as we suggested previously, Weber follows Machiavelli into this attempt to overcome the pessimistic connotations of his own understanding of the worlds of politics and morality. Thus, his realism does not fully capture his theory of the political.²⁸² Instead, his political thought seems to reflect his inner oscillation between the world as essentially unethical (in Thrasymachean terms)

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 109.

²⁷⁸ Lassman, *ibid.*, xix.

²⁷⁹ Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, 117.

²⁸⁰ Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (2008), 10.

²⁸¹ Hennis, *Max Weber*, 101-102.

²⁸² Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of Extraordinary*, 33.

and as fully ethical, but irrecoverably morally fragmented. Both paths, following Plato's reasoning, seem to lead to the same result, i.e. political *amoralism*. Thus, one of the main problems for Weber is how to respond to this *amoralism* without resorting to arbitrary ethical means, which would in the end only reinforce the vicious circle of relativism.

According to Weber, now that the political community no longer existed, this *amoralism* is represented in the form of the 'ethically neutral' contemporary market. 'Domination through a constellation of interests had an ethically neutral character, that is, it was not susceptible to ethical interpretation. This resistance, opacity, of the world in which we are "placed" to ethical interpretation is the "fate" with which Weber's work struggles'.²⁸³ The market signifies the institutionalized transition from classical conceptions of the 'good life' and politics which are strongly connected to the community of life to the contemporary 'disenchanted world'. Value pluralism entails a rationalization of life in terms of interest and pure utility, in the place of the classical rationalization in terms of reasonable shared conceptions of the 'good life'. Utility is the dominant value of the apparently ethically neutral market. Thus, we infer, the market is naturally related to the cultural characteristics of the modern 'disenchanted' cosmos. In such a rationalized cosmos ethical demands with ontological purposes are impossible and utility becomes the substitute, or more correctly the excuse, for moral arbitrariness.²⁸⁴ Hence, '[t]he rationalization of Western culture, brought by science and modern capitalism, means, among other things, that "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play" and consequently "one can in principle, master all things by calculation"'.²⁸⁵

Weber's conception of value pluralism and the consequent 'disenchanted world' seemingly leaves the discussion about the essence and purposes of politics at a dead end. 'How do we make political evaluations and set political aims within a world where political economy has taken the place of political philosophy?' This is the question that brings to the fore all the ethical contradictions and moral conflicts that a politician, a citizen, and the moral character in general, will have to face in the modern world. In other words, the theme of 'the personality and life orders' raises, once again the problem of moral virtue (excellence), or integrity (consistency) in the more contemporary terms of value fragmentation and relativism. This problem is now not

²⁸³ Hennis, *Max Weber*, 102.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁸⁵ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of Extraordinary*, 66.

merely difficult to solve in practical terms (like it was for the classical thinkers), but essentially irresolvable at the philosophical level. The 'life order' which amplifies the paradox for the 'personality' and indicates clearly our philosophic inability to offer a way out for the active person is no other than that of politics. There is a tragic tone implied in Weber's political thought related to the predicament of the moral character in a world where politics is ethically neutral and political economy seems to override political thought.²⁸⁶ Nonetheless, one has to make a choice and try to confront the worst consequences of this realism,

[B]ecause of this fact, the serving of a cause must not be absent if action is to have inner strength. Exactly what the cause, in the service of which the politician strives for power and uses power, looks like a matter of faith. The politician may serve national, humanitarian, social, ethical, cultural, worldly, or religious ends [...] However, some kind of faith must always exist. Otherwise, it is absolutely true that the curse of the creature's worthlessness overshadows even the externally strongest political success.²⁸⁷

B) Domination and the existential meaning: The ethical importance of the nation

In Weber's philosophy of science there is seemingly no leading value upon which one can choose to pursue this or that course of practical action. To search for such a value is, as mentioned previously, to seek the inner connection between his practical-political views and positions and his 'purely scientific' approach to sociological themes.²⁸⁸ According to Andreas Kalyvas, for Weber, neither structural economic imperatives nor objective historical laws nor a blind faith in scientific reason and universal morality would ever relieve modern individuals from their responsibility to decide about the political form of their collective existence. This was a matter of political struggle, decision, and contingent social-historical factors.²⁸⁹ Hence, the paradox: on the one hand, we have the admission that the symbolic foundations of politics and therefore of power are threatened; on the other hand, that societies must fight in order to re-establish those necessary foundations. But they can only do this using the same power which is now lacking any stable ethical justification.

²⁸⁶ Weber, 'The Nation State and Economic Policy', 16.

²⁸⁷ Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', 117.

²⁸⁸ Hennis, *Max Weber*, 165-166.

²⁸⁹ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of Extraordinary*, 18.

The broadening of the subject-matter of *philosophical* reflection [...] has led many of us laymen to believe that the old questions about the nature of human understanding are no longer the ultimate and central questions of philosophy [...] What we find is a *chaos* of different evaluative criteria, some eudaemonistic, some ethical; often both are present together in an obscure identification of one with the other. One finds value judgements being made everywhere without compunction [...] it is the exception rather than the rule for the person making a judgement to clarify *in his own mind*, and for others, the ultimate subjective core of which he proceeds to judge the events he is observing.²⁹⁰

The same clarification of value judgment in one's own mind must also take place in political conduct. Fulfilling this kind of responsibility was the political answer to the fragmentation of value and demanded a certain kind of charisma. Charismatic politics, Weber argued, must be able to transcend ideological plurality and social fragmentations in the name of a new unitary worldview.²⁹¹ This transcendence requires both the understanding of the peculiar ethical demands of the political 'order' and the understanding of one's self in relation to those demands. The system of values is therefore the outcome of power struggles and vice versa. The relationship between power and value is reciprocal. This means that the exercise of power always presupposes certain forms of substantive, but subjective meanings and ethical values. 'It rests on a foundation of shared maxims and social imaginary significations. The symbolic struggles among antagonistic charismatic movements aim precisely at producing competing discourses and beliefs for justifying the founding of new structures of authority and of new political and social thought.'²⁹² A movement is, nevertheless, charismatic only when this self-reflection and understanding is prior to the unifying political act. It is therefore an intentional movement of self-evaluation and redefinition of society's ethical norms.

However, and despite Weber's conception of charismatic domination –an ethical conception of exercising power sufficient enough to compensate for the lack of power's symbolic foundations– '[t]he implications of this shifting of perspective from the substantive content and ends of the political to its mere use of physical coercion are not difficult to see [...] There are neither specific values nor intrinsic ends that the state has to realize nor ethical concerns unique to its nature.'²⁹³ This is the unavoidable consequence of Weber's value pluralism and the origins of his political realism. Weber,

²⁹⁰ Weber, 'The Nation State and Economic Policy', 18-19.

²⁹¹ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of Extraordinary*, 24.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 26-27.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 30.

nonetheless, was concerned for the practical consequences of his own conclusion, because social and individual activity within politics was for him an essential feature for beings who wished to determine their own fates. Weber's realism does not mean that in his political thought it does not matter whether politics lacks ethical causes or not. He has been described as Nietzschean when it comes to values. He distinguishes between two types of rationality: *Zweck* and *Wertrationalität*. The former describes instrumental rationality toward achieving a goal without values or *Sinn*, whilst the latter describes the moral, purposeful aims. Weber argues that although there can be arguments about values in terms of instrumental rationalism these are ultimately insoluble. The latter insight means politics is an irresolvable struggle for rule to achieve value aims. Moreover, every individual's value rationality is ultimately valid, thus legitimate. Yet, the validity of this individual autonomy in terms of rationally determining one's own ethical causes and aims has to be achieved in the context of modern circumstances often guided by the realization of the 'disenchanted world'.

Because of the fragmentation of values and the 'disenchantment' of the world, there is an essential contradiction between political ends and ethical aims. Political ends can only be achieved through the use of power and its justification; but justification depends upon moral evaluations so it is inevitably connected with human ethical aims. This justification and legitimacy of politics are, however, concepts with variable meaning and sometimes not easily comprehensible because of the variety of human values and their equal status; in other words because of moral relativism. Weber, therefore, had to bring together the inexorable fact of domination with the existential search for meaning and the quest for legitimizing one's position within a system of social stratification, considering the power inequalities will always persist and that our ability to justify them will always be limited by value pluralism.²⁹⁴

According to Weber, because all action is in final analysis culturally oriented and substantiated, it is necessary to transcend, in one sense, this conception of the irreducible value pluralism, and recreate –charismatically– political action based on a 'higher' cause. Despite his understanding of politics as a 'life order' within innumerable other spheres of action, Weber believes that *amoralism* –which is the natural outcome of the irreducible value pluralism– within politics can be destructive for humanity. Even if the rules of conduct within politics are a relative thing, autonomously constituted and separate from other ethical considerations, politics has a particular characteristic which assigns to it a universal dimension. This characteristic is

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 47.

for Weber the ability to monopolize the use of violence. Thus, we could argue, although we can have a variety of equally important questions about the ethical aims and principles of different societies in different times, there is usually only one question—however much it may be diversely abstracted and formulated in different contexts—regarding the relation between morality and power. It is, I believe, this question and its consequences for the quality of human existence that Weber conceived as the definitive and exceptional feature of the ‘order of politics’, which in turn required a peculiar corresponding theory about the ‘political personality’. It is of the utmost importance then when he refers to ‘the cause, in the service of which the politician strives for power and uses power’ because it is the quality of this cause which will determine the quality of social and individual existence. What was then the cause which was worth this passionate devotion in Weber’s political thought?

We wish, so far as it is in our power, to constitute external relations in a manner not directed to the immediate happiness of men and women, but rather so that, exposed to the necessities of an unavoidable struggle for existence, the best in them is preserved, the qualities both physical and spiritual which we would like to preserve for the nation.²⁹⁵

The nation is for Weber *the* life order that provides what can be regarded as the greatest scope for the central theme as this has been analyzed so far, i.e. the options of the personality within this extreme variety of life conditions. However, in line with his own conception of value pluralism, the nation does not represent a transcending universal purpose; it is not an ‘indubitable value’.²⁹⁶ The nation as a modern type can only be interpreted in combination to its necessary supplement, that is, the state. The nation-state is a sociological type of the modern era which succinctly illustrates the current correlations between power and ethics. Thus, ‘Sociologically, the state cannot be defined in terms of its ends [...] Ultimately, one can define the modern state sociologically only in terms of the specific *means* peculiar to it, as to every political association, namely, the use of physical force’.²⁹⁷ Thus Weber proceeds to the definition of the state as the sole source of the ‘right’ to use violence:

Hence, politics for us means striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state... when a cabinet minister or an official is said to be a ‘political’ official, or when a decision is

²⁹⁵ Weber quoted in Hennis, *Max Weber*, 83.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁹⁷ Weber, ‘Politics as a Vocation’, 77.

said to be politically determined, what is always meant is that interests in the distribution, maintenance, or transfer of power are decisive for answering the questions and determining the decision or the official's sphere of activity. He who is active in politics strives for power either as a means in serving other aims, ideal or egoistic, or as 'power for power's sake,' that is, in order to enjoy the prestige-feeling that power gives. Like the political institutions historically preceding it, the state is a relation of men dominating men, a relation supported by means of legitimate (i.e. considered to be legitimate) violence. If the state is to exist, the dominated must obey the authority claimed by the powers that be.²⁹⁸

We should repeat here that this definition of the state does not mean that Weber's aim is to understand politics in a limited sense. He remains true to his own 'scientific' approach which requires an analysis clear of subjective evaluations and desires to avoid any teleological attributions to the sociological type of the state. Violence is all there is as a definitive feature. The modern state is a compulsory association which organizes domination; this domination is categorized in different types according to the type of its maintenance and organization, the way it uses the administrative means and, of course, according to the way it is being ethically justified. The state 'has been successful in seeking to monopolize the legitimate use of physical force as a means of domination within a territory.'²⁹⁹

Moral justification of the physical force means legitimate domination. This conception is very important for understanding Weber's political thought. For him, if anything is 'vulgar', it is the result of the fashion of exploiting ethics as a means of 'being in the right'.³⁰⁰ Thus, even if the concept of the 'state' is another sociological type with no intrinsic value as such, it becomes ethically important because it is where the modern incarnation of the struggle between politics and ethics takes place. Their relationship is now conceived as the relationship between power and legitimacy. Legitimacy, exactly because we now know of the relative value of ethical aims, is then a matter of charismatic persuasion. The charismatic leader should be able to offer the necessary ethical substance, if only temporarily,³⁰¹ upon which legitimate authority can

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 78.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 82-83.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 118.

³⁰¹ The temporal ability of the 'skilled' politician to overcome the adversities of fortune was one of Machiavelli's implied concerns according to the last unconventional interpretation discussed previously. According to this argument, Machiavelli was indeed ironical towards such a conception of 'relative virtue', because history has taught us that its political outcomes do not endure the loss of the 'virtuous' character. This is why he sought to discover a fundamental value which could be used as the basis of a more permanent political attitude. Weber's undoubted value pluralism, on the other hand, requires 'virtuousness' in a limited, contextual, way because there really is no ultimate value which can be used as

be created. Hence, the charismatic leader is the political personality who can avoid the temptation for power politics. 'Power politics, impoverishes politics because it reduces it to a "convictionless cultivation of purely formal maintenance of the state without *any* substantive goal".'³⁰²

'The state itself has no *intrinsic* value in that it is a purely technical instrument for the realization of other values from which alone it derives its value, and it can retain this value only as long as it does not seek to transcend this auxiliary status.'³⁰³ Therefore, although the state does not constitute an autonomous value, it does have the highest ethical significance because it organizes and realizes all other values. The form and essence of this organization will result into the quality of the nation. 'A nation', Weber argues, 'forgives if its interests have been damaged, but no nation forgives if its honour has been offended, especially by a bigoted self-righteousness.'³⁰⁴ This argument indicates how and why Weber attributed the highest ethical significance to the concept of the nation-state despite his instrumental definition of it. The monopoly of physical force by the state determines and is determined in a reciprocal relationship with the specific values of the particular society. If this monopoly of force effectively reorganizes and realizes those cultural values in a manner which will resolve their basic tensions and contradictions, then a national identity is created and further cultivated into integration. This identity concentrates and integrates the national sentiments in a way that provides for the re-enchantment of the world. It provides an overarching moral ideal for social unification.

For us the *nation state* is not something vague which, as some believe, is elevated even higher, the more its nature is shrouded in mystical obscurity. Rather, it is the worldly organization of the nation's power.³⁰⁵

The diptych of the nation-state reflects Weber's attempt to synthesize the contradictory demands of the modern rationalized cosmos –wherein economic forces have become dominant and express themselves in the market– with the necessity of symbolic foundations for politics in such a 'disenchanted' world. The concept of the state is clearly differentiated from that of the nation. The nation is a cultural community

a permanent normative guide for virtuous action. This is why the re-definition of social values is a matter of charisma and it is sometimes doomed to perish along with the extinction of the charismatic personality.

³⁰² Weber quoted in Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of Extraordinary*, 37.

³⁰³ Weber quoted in S.H. Kim, 'Max Weber's Liberal Nationalism', *History of Political Thought*, Volume 23, Number 3 (2002), 437.

³⁰⁴ Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', 118.

³⁰⁵ Weber, 'The Nation State and Economic Policy', 16.

that is held together by the powerful bonds of language and the moral sentiments transmitted by the mother tongue. However, although the nation and the state are two different and separate things they do require one another for mutual survival. Nations need to become states in order to defend the boundaries of the cultural community against erosion or assault. States need to become nations in order to lay the foundations of internal unity.³⁰⁶ This unity is a matter of legitimacy. In a post-religious age, the search for meaning takes the specific form of the pursuit of political legitimacy. Thus, the stability and continuity of the modern order of the nation-state depend on the enduring belief in its validity and normativity.³⁰⁷ This continuity and stability are fundamentally, existentially necessary for the moral self-reflection of the personality. The moral integrity of the human character is only possible when the unavoidable variety of 'value-orders' has been reconciled and overridden by a 'higher' cause. This is why the term integrity presumes an understanding of moral attitude with consistency and constancy, which are nonetheless unlikely in a fragmented world that constantly poses contradictory demands to the human personality.

This is the epitome of Weber's political thought in relation to his scientifically grounded value pluralism: the universal and unchanging problem of political philosophy is raised when we conceive of politics without ethical substance, because we have beforehand rejected the universal validity of values. The usual outcome of such a situation is political *amoralism*, which in more common terms means abuse and misuse of power. According to Weber, since we accept the perennial nature of this problem we can resolve it using the resources at our disposal within the particular social paradigm we find ourselves. However, before we are able to do such a thing it is also required that we examine and understand our particular social paradigm against universal history. This is necessary because 'The behaviour of men in various societies is intelligible only in the context of their general conception of existence'.³⁰⁸ It is necessary in order to capture both the relativity of our social paradigm in terms of cultural values and the steps we need to take politically in relation to those values. For Weber, the contextual and thus temporal solution to the universal problem of politics and ethics in the modern era is the *nation-state* when lead by a charismatic leadership. 'While aspiring to expose the normative deficit and moral arbitrariness of the existing order, charismatic

³⁰⁶ Parkin, *Max Weber*, 72.

³⁰⁷ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of Extraordinary*, 54-55.

³⁰⁸ Aron, *Main Currents Vol. 2*, 257.

movements have to rationalize and systematize their alternative views of the world to make them more appealing to various needs of the ruled.³⁰⁹

The state is the culmination of modern instrumental rationalization. It was created in the first place in order to administrate the 'ethically neutral' market in an organized and efficient manner within a given territory and in competition with other states. Its conception as an ethically neutral tool represents the modern inclination to scientific objectivity and efficacy. The equivalent of this objectivity in social action is impartiality. Thus, the quality of the personality of those who serve the state (public servants) must be related to those two terms: objectivity and impartiality. The nation, on the other hand, reflects the human ontological need for an ethically substantive symbolic reference. It is thus the moral supplement of the state and the field of conduct for charismatic leaders. Without it the state is not only neutral, but it becomes pointless and dangerous, because organized violence without a moral basis leads to domination of power for power's sake. In this sense, the nation has ethical priority over the state. The nation therefore by its nature poses subjective demands to the apparently impartial administration of the state. The quality of those who pose these demands must be different from the quality of those who serve the state. This is the difference between politicians and public servants. The politicians must have the ability to calculate and promote the interests of the nation without having recourse to scientifically proven objective moral guides. Impartiality is not an option as a general normative source because politicians *de facto* engage in arbitrary moral arguments. Thus, they must be able to balance the subjective demands of the nation with the impartial attitudes of the state in order to achieve the symbolic re-orientation; and they must do this without reducing everything to utility. Their virtue is therefore close to Aristotle's practical wisdom although now devoid of any teleological points of reference.

C) The first fundamental distinction between morality and politics: The 'ethic of conviction' and the 'ethic of responsibility'

Weber is clearly more interested in the qualities and characteristics of the politician than in the moral character of the public servant; this also indicates the moral superiority of the nation over the state, the neutrality of which is conceived as potentially very dangerous. The political personality is ethically a more complex case because the ability to calculate the nation's interest without drifting to tactics of political *amoralism*

³⁰⁹ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of Extraordinary*, 60.

requires a very particular and exceptional set of abilities. This set constitutes the essence of statesmanship, the charismatic domination which creates the conditions for social unification. Thus, Weber, in order for us to understand what are the qualities that make for a good politician, reduces his value pluralism to a categorization of moral values with two fundamental types that mirror the general tension between politics and ethics. These types represent the morality of responsibility and the morality of conviction, or the absolute ethic of ultimate ends. According to Aron these two terms might be illustrated by referring to Machiavelli –or a particular interpretation of him– on the one hand, and Kant on the other. The ethic of responsibility is one that the man of action cannot ignore. It consists in placing one-self in a situation, imagining the consequences of possible decisions, and trying to introduce into the fabric of events an act that will lead to certain desired results or consequences. This means, that an ‘ethic of responsibility governs a means-ends interpretation of action’³¹⁰ and fits the account of republican ethics (as opposed to Christian ethics). The ethic of conviction, on the other hand, is the morality that urges each of us to act according to his feelings, without explicit or implicit reference to the consequences. This ethic fits the account of Christian ethics and its philosophical expressions. According to the ethic of conviction, if someone ‘has no other goal than to act in conformity with his conscience and refuses to take a specific action because his conscience impedes him, if the refusal itself is the object of his decision, then sublime or ridiculous, it matters little –he becomes irrefutable.’³¹¹

Within the endless variety of values and ‘orders of life’ politics, Weber admits, is a special one and cannot be dismissed with the simple observation that all values are equally valued. In other words ethical realism does not and should not lead directly to a concept of unqualified political realism³¹² because in practice this is usually translated into political *amoralism*. The personality or moral character of those who will engage in politics is, then, of greater importance than in other spheres of human activity. The crucial feature is of course the use of power and its consequences. The absolute ethic does not ask for consequences. With regards to its ultimate ends ‘it is all or nothing’ and if one’s goal is to become a saint then one must be acting saintly in all occasions.

³¹⁰ Aron, *Main Currents* Vol. 2, 252.

³¹¹ Ibid., 255.

³¹² Hard or unqualified political realism means that the moral and practical consequences of political conduct are not recognized as exceptional. Instead politics should be regarded ethically like all other spheres of action with its own ethical rules and disconnected from wider or more ordinary moral concerns. As it has been repeatedly argued from Plato onwards this conception of political ethics is unavoidably related to power politics and political *amoralism*.

So the question that arises is how we can reconcile this reasoning with the necessities that the use of power imposes upon political action.

We must be clear about the fact that all ethically oriented conduct may be guided by one of two fundamentally differing and irreconcilably opposed maxims: conduct can be oriented to an 'ethic of ultimate ends' or to an 'ethic of responsibility'. This is not to say that an ethic of ultimate ends is identical with irresponsibility, or that an ethic of responsibility is identical with unprincipled opportunism [...] However, there is an abysmal contrast between conduct that follows the maxim of an ethic of ultimate ends –that is, in religious terms, 'The Christian does rightly and leaves the results with the Lord'– and conduct that follows the maxim of an ethic of responsibility, in which case one has to give an account of foreseeable results of one's action [...] a man who believes in an ethic of responsibility takes account of precisely the average deficiencies of people.³¹³

Clearly, in Weber's view, there is no morality of responsibility which is not inspired by moral convictions, since in final analysis, the morality of responsibility is a search for effectiveness, and the question arises: effectiveness for what? It is equally clear that the morality of conviction, or of the ultimate ends, cannot be the morality of the state and, certainly, a morality of conviction in its purer form –one must be saintly in everything– cannot be the morality of the man who enters into the game of politics.³¹⁴ For Weber, from no ethics in the world can it be concluded when and to what extent the ethically good purpose 'justifies' the ethically dangerous means and ramifications.³¹⁵ However there is one thing granted: that the decisive means for politics is violence. Therefore, a sense of responsibility acquires more gravity in the sphere of politics; power equals responsibility and from that we can infer the pre-eminent qualities of the politician i.e. passion, a feeling of responsibility, a sense of proportion and so on. In addition, the ethic of responsibility allows us to identify the vices of the political character the major of which, according to Weber, is vanity that entails a misuse and abuse of power; for him the greatest irresponsibility is that one enjoys power merely for power's sake.³¹⁶ As we have already argued, 'power politics' for its own sake, without commitment to a cause, was for Weber empty and absurd.³¹⁷

³¹³ Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', 120-121.

³¹⁴ Aron, *Main Currents Vol. 2*, 255.

³¹⁵ Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', 121.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 115-117.

³¹⁷ Lassman, *ibid.*, xxii.

For Weber, despite this exposition against the ‘ethic of conviction’ in politics as irresponsible, the abuse or misuse of power has been explained so far in terms of action that lacks ethical substance. In addition, he clearly states that the ‘ethic of conviction’ does not necessarily mean irresponsibility. The same goes for the ‘ethic of responsibility’ which can sometimes become sheer opportunism; there is a matter of degree. Thus, it should be useful to avoid reducing all political action to either one of these two types of values. The basic tension between the two ethics reflects the more general, complex and conflicting demands of morality upon the active, and in particular the political, personality. The categorization between the two ethics is a necessary step to understanding the peculiar demands that the active, and in particular the political, life makes on the moral character. It is necessary to understand that when other people may face the consequences of one’s choice –which is always the case in politics, thus its special nature– one must learn to discern where the principle of conscience meets the consequence of action. Thus, even though, essentially, in all human conduct, responsibility requires a prior cause, principle or conviction upon which it can be realized and, vice versa, conviction requires responsibility in order to retain its moral value, in politics being responsible is ultimately more important than being devoted to a cause. ‘It is’, Weber argues, ‘the specific means of legitimate violence as such in the hand of human associations which determines the peculiarity of all ethical problems in politics. Whosoever contracts with violent means for whatever ends –and every politician does– is exposed to its specific consequences.’³¹⁸

Passion, a feeling of responsibility, a sense of proportion are all virtues reminiscent of Aristotle, and the way the politician must reconcile them reminds us the Platonic conception of the contradictory forces in the soul. The fundamental difference is that, now, there is no universally acceptable normative guide for those virtues. Thus, despite the distinctive ethical burden of politics (because of its relation to organized violence), there is no ethical authority, in Weber’s view, for the politician to consult. ‘He must rely on his own judgements and, ultimately, seek to reconcile, as best as he can, the demands of principle and the likely consequences.’³¹⁹ This combination is obviously more difficult in the modern ‘disenchanted’ world. There is neither an ideal Form to be discovered nor a teleological conception of man as a political animal. Even the Machiavellian-republican principle of liberty is a relative value. Thus, a deep ethical self-reflection is required in addition to the understanding of the world as

³¹⁸ Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, 124.

³¹⁹ Lassman, *ibid.*, xxii-xxiii.

ethically groundless. Nevertheless, one must find a passionate conviction and guide it with sober realism. The problem that no cause can be ‘proved’, simply by intellectual means, to be superior to any other is irrelevant. All that seems to matter is that there must be a cause to supply the inner meaning essential for genuine political conduct.³²⁰ ‘What goes to make up the “genuine men and women” who can follow the “vocation of politics”? It is once again at root the capacity of devotion to the matter at hand “if action is to have inner strength”.’³²¹

D) Weber’s solution: The responsible leader and the necessary ethical re-orientation

There is an ambiguity in Weber’s view of politics as an ethically special ‘life order’ because this would be against his own conception of value pluralism based on universal history. The vocation of politics initially seems to be another profession amongst many others. However, it is clear in his arguments that politics is an ethical sphere which is not suitable for every personality and therefore it should not be explained purely in terms of value pluralism. If this is the case, it might mean that there is a higher morality, which is not the morality of the ordinary man, governing the action of the statesman –provided that the political man is guided by an overarching collective aim.³²² Weber never said this directly, but it was the only solution he found to his existential concerns. In any case, it is in the field of political action that a human being can demonstrate how to live a life worth living, even if this evaluation is merely subjective –besides it cannot be anything else. The responsible leader is in this sense an amplified version of the responsible man in his daily affairs. The responsible leader must be able to resolve conflicts and redefine values in order to give meaning to social life, sometimes knowing that social life is meaningless. This kind of leaders must be willing to elevate national interests above sectional interests;³²³ they must be willing to overcome the material, political and cultural fragmentation of the political society; but most importantly they must be convinced themselves that it is worth fighting for a cause, even if they acknowledge the relativity of all causes. This is the only way to ensure that leadership will not degenerate into power politics, which is in a way the only moral certainty universal history has taught us.

³²⁰ Ibid., xxiii.

³²¹ Hennis, *Max Weber*, 72.

³²² Aron, *Main Currents Vol. 2*, 252.

³²³ Parkin, *Max Weber*, 106.

[Weber's] main objection against power politics does not target its limitless and arbitrary character but its symbolic deficit and its inability to influence collective representations and to realize cultural values. Power politics, by seeking power for the sake of power, consists of a waste of power as such. The means of politics have become the goals of the politician. This overturning of the means-ends relationship involves a use of power that lacks the appropriate symbolic support and fails to influence value orientations. In that sense, it lacks a "cultural mission" and suffers from a huge legitimation deficit.³²⁴

The cultural mission in this modern era for Weber is, as mentioned previously, nationalistic in its essence. In the 'disenchanted' conditions of the modern world, where the political community does not longer exist in its classical sense, the only alternative for symbolic reorientation at a mass level is the nation. Thus, the general purpose for the statesman must be the creation of public citizenship in combination with a general national patriotism. The ultimate end of politics seems then to be a political education which will infuse the virtues of the responsible leader to the rest of the citizens. Hence, despite the irreducible variety of values and 'life orders', there will always be some personalities that can put the public interest above parochial, private and class interests. From this argument we can infer Weber's conception of political science as an overriding science in the classical sense. If everything else is relative, politics is still the only stable point of reference in terms of ethical organization that humanity can rely upon. The carrier of power, i.e. the state, may be ethically neutral but the way *we* decide to use this power will never cease to have an intrinsic value. This organization may differ from time to time but the political mission in an abstract sense is always the same.

Weber's attempt to connect political action to a clear set of ethical demands so as to avoid confusion and ineffectiveness is clearly outlined in the above arguments. Starting from the new –at his time– concepts of bureaucracy, modern democracy and the expert officialdom, he perceived this great and ineluctable process that lead to professional politics as the outcome of modern rationalization. He thereafter had to reinstate the problem that classical political philosophy struggled with; that is, the tensions between politics and ethics and the demands of those tensions on the moral character of those who are involved in politics. As analyzed above, the problem was now more difficult because Weber had to take into consideration two additional factors: first, an objective approach to universal history which reveals that there are no universal

³²⁴ Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of Extraordinary*, 36.

values upon which we can pursue political goals; and second the right to use violence on a massive scale, which urgently required for a renewal of the symbolic foundations of politics. This renewal was of course close to impossible exactly because of the rediscovered and now scientifically undoubted moral relativism.

The solution Weber suggests in this modern case of the problematic relationship between politics and morality concentrates all those features that will allow for the transition from the classical approaches to the problem to the more contemporary accounts of it. Weber's philosophical analysis of the relation between morality and politics is based upon the agenda of his time, namely, the debate between consequentialism and ethical absolutism considering the peculiar factor of the state's right to organized violence. Nevertheless, the essence of his argument is in continuity with the classical purposes of political philosophy. He, like Plato, Aristotle and Machiavelli, also accepts the unavoidability of the corrupting effects of politics on the moral character and he attempts to prepare political candidates for the moral strength and readiness that the conduct of political power demands. 'The deepest core of the *socio-political* problem' he argues 'is not the question of the *economic* situation of the *ruled* but of the political qualifications of the *ruling* and *rising* classes.'³²⁵

Nonetheless, Weber does indeed constitute the transitional point to contemporary political philosophy, especially in terms of understanding political morality in relation to our newly conceived account of ethics as permanently fragmented. Machiavelli may have been the first who, even unintentionally or ironically, made the argument about the pluralism of values and the need to calculate action in terms of either consequence or principle. Thus the transition from virtue ethics to modern accounts of moral action had already begun. However, Machiavelli could not have conceived value pluralism in a similar manner to Weber. Weber's moral pluralism was a wider and more comprehensive notion based on the lessons of universal history; an academic resource which was not available to the same extent in Machiavelli's time. What Weber knew with certainty was that the variety of 'life orders', and thus 'orders of value', is endless. It is not only politics versus Christianity. The contemporary background of moral and political philosophy is more complex including the concepts of pluralism, the modern state and modern science, all of which entail a tension between politics and ethics.³²⁶ Thus principle and utility can be used as general guides but they cannot be sufficient by themselves for the human personality.

³²⁵ Weber, 'The Nation State and Economic Policy', 26.

³²⁶ Rawls, *Lectures*, 5.

Judgement becomes therefore more difficult and, accordingly, the concept of choosing without being ethically prepared and certain becomes more and more significant. Hence, Weber was one of the first modern theorists who rejected the debate between deontology and utilitarianism in politics as non-realistic. Instead, his attempt is based on the reality that political responsibility demands a compromise between an absolutist and a consequentialist approach. According to him, the power that is now available requires special philosophical attention, although the basic argument has not been changed radically since antiquity. In politics it is sometimes necessary, in order to behave honourably, to use force. The intrinsic logic of either consequentialist or deontological theories is not sufficient for the good politician and the statesman.

Principle and utility are the philosophical tools used to explain the modern rationalized world. However, as Hennis argues about Weber's understanding of politics, the real nobility of humans is not defined by 'need' and 'interest' or 'right', but rather by strength and capacity for dedication. 'This capacity can be misused; who would dispute it?' But in Weber's ancient sense of political thought there is always the question of unfolding the power of the soul, an unfolding that appeared to be possible not on an individual basis, but rather communally and associatively. This ancient sense requires the forcing of the individual into the political order, allowing him to participate in its responsibilities and risks.³²⁷ Nevertheless, and despite his ancient sense of political thought, Weber conceived and explained what would constitute the basis of political conduct in the contemporary world. The lack of a stable ethical set of guiding principles either in teleological, deontological or utilitarian terms has irrevocably transformed political action into a constant struggle of choices based upon arbitrary and dilemmatic situations. It is this transformation that has rendered the ethical side of politics as ultimately incomprehensible nowadays, and has therefore made politics susceptible to what all classical thinkers were afraid of; the abuse of political power. The explication and understanding of the contemporary ethically dilemmatic conditions of political life is therefore a necessary task for political philosophy, and it is to this understanding to which we turn our attention in the second part of this thesis.

³²⁷ Hennis, *Max Weber*, 196-197.

PART TWO

A MORAL POLITICS: ITS ESSENCE AND BOUNDARIES IN A WORLD OF CONFLICTING MORAL VALUES

5. The Possibility of Moral Dilemmas and the Importance of Moral Judgment

A) Modern moral philosophy: Monistic and pluralistic explanations of morality

The short history of the relation between political and ethical philosophy should have been able to demonstrate that the problem between politics and morality is a recurrent theme amongst political philosophers of different epochs. Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli and Weber are some of the major figures in the history of political philosophy who represent a conception of ethics as a core motivational and organizing power behind political practice. Plato's work represents an endless attempt to offer an undisputed way of ensuring rational self-sufficiency in the face of randomness and 'fragility of goodness'.³²⁸ For him, when politics is combined with pure reason, we can override all the contradictions of the ordinary human condition and as a result the 'good life' becomes a tangible aim. Aristotle's work, on the other hand, developed the opposite concept that the best human life is one that necessarily includes activities which are vulnerable to the vicissitudes of fortune. Machiavelli reinstated in modern terms the problem of the variety of ethical values and he tried to interpret its significance in a world where the dominant values of human excellence derived from the Judeo/Christian tradition. His philosophical aims remain ambiguous as to whether he attempted to either endorse or ironically criticize a politics devoid of any 'ordinary' ethical constraints. Weber, finally, analyzed the same problem under the spectacles of modern moral theory and concluded that political life and the individual ideal of human excellence may not be reconcilable when they are strictly guided by deontological or utilitarian principles.³²⁹

Thus, if there is a clear point to be derived from their ideas about what the ethical content of politics is, it is that throughout the centuries several philosophical, and correspondingly practical, approaches have been developed and proposed to societies as a way of resolving the tension between politics and morality. Nevertheless, none of these approaches or traditions managed to offer a terminal solution to this problem, a

³²⁸ The phrase is taken from Martha Nussbaum's major work on the ancient Greek subject of 'moral luck' and the external factors that affect moral agency but, at the same time, cannot be controlled by the moral agent. See Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986.

³²⁹ Stephen de Wijze, 'Tragic Remorse – The Anguish of Dirty Hands', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 7, No.5 (January 2005), 455.

failure that may not be due to the limitations of the approaches themselves. Weber's understanding of the ethical substance of politics has been extremely useful because with its cold sociological logic, but also sincere political concern, reaffirmed that which has been difficult to admit within the classical normative tradition of political philosophy. That the relationship between politics and morality will always pose existential problems to philosophy, and that those problems will only have temporal and contextual solutions. This may be the case for two reasons: first, the complexity and plurality of human societies; and second, its combination with the human species' limited capacity to achieve moral and intellectual perfection. This is both an epistemological and an ontological argument which prompts someone not only to a specific conception about the essence of morality, but also to a specific understanding about the purpose and character of politics and the significance of the moral agent, within politics.

Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli and Weber have been chosen for this short history of politics and morality because, despite their differences, they seem to have been engaged in a conversation which is based on some commonly accepted concerns. These concerns constitute some of the core subjects of political philosophy until the present time and as we have thoroughly illustrated they include concepts such as the relation between universal justice and political justice; virtue and political judgement; moral appearances and political success; happiness, political legitimacy and so on and so forth. All those concepts share a worry, sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit, that human activity, which is either expressed in action or in thought, is full of antinomies that are not easily resolved or overcome and more often than not produce catastrophic results at the political level. This existential concern along with its natural political responses is the common basis in the philosophies of the thinkers whom we have been engaged with. This is the tradition which we have previously referred to as the school of political science in the ancient sense. Those thinkers, and many others who do not belong strictly in the field of political philosophy, attempted to offer normative solutions to the puzzle of how to lead a good life in the face of terrible moral predicaments, an inevitable and often tragic aspect of our moral reality.³³⁰ These attempts can be generally classified in contemporary political philosophy within the field of 'dirty hands' scenarios. Stephen de Wijze is then right to argue that this shared interest and approval of 'dirty hands' situations can be found across political ideologies.

³³⁰ Ibid., p. 456.

Because they all face the problem, sooner or later, according to which it is possible for an action to be justified, even morally obligatory, yet nevertheless somehow wrong.³³¹

However, the transition from ancient to modern philosophy has been made by the development of theories that rejected the idea that the complexity of human life raises an insurmountable problem to the achievement of a perfect moral theory. This rejection was based on philosophical assumptions which purported to show the possibility for faultless moral and political action. The transition has been made in the name of a moral progress which is conceived as the natural projection of the progress of natural sciences. These –dominant at times– modern traditions could never accept the explicit tension between morality and politics as recognized by the classical school of thought. The modern idea that moral theory has progressed far enough so as to be able to call it complete meant that there should be no tension between politics and morality in the first place, because there can be no real moral conflicts in general. Hence, the necessity to re-establish practically a consistent relationship between political conduct and ethical aims –for example through the entity of the polis, the institution of education or the concept of the nation-state– is no longer there. For those modern philosophical traditions of perfect moral explanations of the world, Machiavelli's anxiety regarding the gap between ordinary ethics and successful political conduct, or Weber's realist acknowledgement that responsible politicians and morally absolute behaviours cannot coexist, are disregarded as paradoxical.

Roughly, these modern traditions insist on moral perfectibility either through a perfectly arranged system of *prima facie* moral principles and obligations that conceive as the primary moral cause the human being as an end in itself, or through a system of clear and coherent utilitarian constructs, for which the primary moral cause is utility. Thus modern ethics becomes a normative decision-procedure based either on deontic theories (codifiability) or utilitarianism (advantage).³³² The perfectionist reasoning behind these theories usually leads to the misinterpretation of thinkers like Machiavelli and Weber who approached morality as an ambiguous subject of study. Moral perfectionism should always attempt to reconstruct political philosophies clear of ethical ambiguities. Thus it cannot account for arguments based on the assumptions that the complexity and plurality of our world and the morally defective human nature cannot be altered by comprehensive theory –this is still the offspring of imperfect human beings. In addition, these traditions cannot account for the significance of the

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (2001), 7.

political process in grasping the ethical substance of human action. Thus they underestimate the significance of the moral character to understanding the ethical complexity and defectiveness of the world and his readiness to take the burden of conflicting action. Aristotle, Machiavelli and Weber did not attempt to solve the moral predicament of the public man by suggesting a perfect system of moral principles—even Plato’s philosophical experiment can be understood more as an attempt to pose the problem than to resolve it. Instead each of them suggested a *way of life* that would make for a certain understanding of the relationship between politics and morality and thus for the corresponding appropriate conduct.

We have seen that the problematic relationship between politics and morality is usually conceived as a conflict between different kinds of principles and values, especially, in ancient times, in relation to the different demands of the private and public sphere of conduct, or in relation to the conflicting requirements of a plurality of ‘life orders’ in more modern terms. These conflicting requirements, with their serious political connotations, pose the problem, essentially, as a moral dilemma. If a comprehensive moral theory is possible, the distinction between private and public morality, or the differentiation of a variety of autonomous ethical orders, would only be apparent, not real, and political conduct could be faultlessly guided by basic moral claims. If not, then the distinction would entail the need for a different approach, since the already established moral rules would not be sufficient as a moral guide for politics. In other words, sooner or later, the tension between morality and politics is going to take the more basic form of a moral dilemma; i.e. choosing between the peculiar moral demands of politics and the moral claims of ordinary morality (this choice can take different forms like choosing between obedience to a specific law and a universal law, or between the virtue of being a good citizen and the virtue of being a good man). Therefore, a reconstruction of philosophical traditions based on the concept of moral dilemmas would result in two basic categories: monistic philosophies and pluralistic philosophies. Monistic philosophies, based upon the assumption that the source of morality is unitary and thus total moral coherency—theoretically and practically—is possible, would reject in principle the possibility that a real, i.e. morally insoluble, dilemma can ever exist. Pluralistic philosophies, on the other hand, start from the assumption that both theory and experience teach us that there cannot be a unitary source of morality and thus coherent action is and will always be problematic. Accordingly to those two different conceptions of the essence of morality, we also have two different understandings of the moral agent or human personality. In the first

monistic approach moral integrity is indeed conceived literally in terms of absolute consistency and continuity. In the second pluralistic approach moral integrity is identified less with the success of following given moral guides and more with the ability to make appropriate judgements.

Hence, if we wish to improve our understanding of the conflict between politics and morality (if there is such a conflict as the previous chapters suggested), we have to understand what a moral dilemma in itself is and whether it is right to argue that there really are moral dilemmas or not. If there are (against the arguments that derive from monistic philosophies), then we should have to grapple with Weber's existential problem, although now posed in a slightly different manner: that is, we should understand whether moral dilemmas arising in the political arena are different from more ordinary moral dilemmas that may arise in everyday life, that is, outside politics, and in what sense they are different. The distinction of the moral rules of private and public conduct; the importance of having ethical causes and aims in politics; the concepts of moral integrity and virtue; and, related to all those problems, the practical options for the man of action in such conditions, all depend either on an understanding of the world as ethically fragmented and imperfect, or as morally comprehensible and consistent. In a few words, one has to deliberate what would politics mean in a world where there are no moral dilemmas, and vice versa.

B) Deontic and utilitarian theories: Moral conflicts are only apparent

According to Christopher Gowans 'A moral dilemma is a situation in which an agent *S* morally ought to do *A* and morally ought to do *B* but cannot do both, either because *B* is just not-doing-*A* or because some contingent feature of the world prevents doing both.'³³³ Put in a simpler way: 'a man both ought to do something and ought not to do that thing.' Here is a simple example borrowed from Socrates' discussion with Polemarchus: a good friend lends me his knife saying that he will be back for it tomorrow and I promise to return it when he is. But, in the meantime, I found out that my friend intends to use the knife in order to kill another man. I ought to return the knife, since I promised it and yet I ought not to return it to him, since to do so would be to be indirectly responsible for a murder which is forbidden by my moral principles.³³⁴

³³³ Christopher W. Gowans, 'The Debate on Moral Dilemmas', in Christopher W. Gowans (ed.), *Moral Dilemmas*, Oxford (1987), 3.

³³⁴ E. J. Lemmon, 'Moral Dilemmas', in Gowans (ed.), *Moral Dilemmas*, 105.

Now, theoretical scrutiny (weighing the consequences or prioritizing the involved principles) may not be necessary in order to reveal that this situation is in the end merely an *apparent* moral dilemma –essentially this was Socrates argument. However, in addition to Weber’s theoretical conclusion that different ‘life orders’ will have different and equally valued moral commands, contemporary work in applied ethics has also shown that compelling arguments can be given for incompatible positions –of equal strength– on a variety of topics; abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, preferential treatment, and censorship are but a few examples.³³⁵

Rights, duties, obligations and principles often conflict and it is not usually obvious in advance which of them should take precedence in given situations.³³⁶ The question then is ‘are there any real moral dilemmas, or are they only apparent?’ The history of the relationship between politics and morality, as already mentioned, is only a small part of the philosophical, literary and, generally, artistic discussion which attempts to answer this more general question. The centrality of moral conflict to human life is expressed in Sophocles’ poetry, in Shakespeare’s works and in Melville’s stories. ‘The substance of drama is the substance of life.’³³⁷ Hence, the collision of duties and moral principles is recognized throughout the centuries and within different social contexts. Modern ‘progressive’ philosophies which constitute the core of the monistic understanding of moral theory attempted to demystify this collision and resolve moral dilemmas once and for all. Marxism, Kantianism and Utilitarianism are the most prominent adherents of this proposition. Their argument is not to be taken lightly; this problem is the quintessence of philosophy. As Walzer argues, the question relates not only to the coherence and harmony of the moral universe, but also to the relative ease or difficulty –or impossibility– of living a moral life. ‘It is not, therefore, merely a philosopher’s question. If such dilemma can arise, whether frequently or very rarely, any of us might one day face it.’³³⁸

As we have already mentioned, there are two main traditions with respect to the problem of moral dilemmas: one which proposes that moral dilemmas are an unavoidable feature of our everyday lives (that becomes even more acute in the world of politics which instantiates a sharper conflict); the other which has viewed moral dilemmas as mere appearances. Both traditions have their origins in Platonic

³³⁵ Gowans, ‘The Debate on Moral Dilemmas’, 3.

³³⁶ Mark H. Moore, ‘Realms of Obligation and Duties’, in Joel L. Fleishman, Lance Liebman & Mark H. Moore (eds.), *Public Duties: The Moral Obligations of Government Officials*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts (1981), 18.

³³⁷ Gowans, ‘The Debate on Moral Dilemmas’, 4.

³³⁸ Walzer, ‘Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands’, 161.

philosophy. Viewing moral dilemmas as mere appearances has been the case with the two predominant traditions of western modern moral philosophy –Kantianism and Utilitarianism. ‘Both Kantians and Utilitarians have thought that, for any apparent conflict, either one of the conflicting ought statements is not true or the two statements do not really enjoin incompatible actions. It is admitted that there are cases in which there may be uncertainty about the resolution of an apparent dilemma. But it is thought to be impossible that morality could actually impose upon an agent two “oughts” when both cannot be fulfilled.’³³⁹ This impossibility is based upon the view that morality itself is progressing along with moral theory, making possible for us to prioritize successfully between the different ‘oughts’ and thus always to avoid or find a permanent solution to moral conflicts.

Kant provides one of the standard arguments against the possibility of moral dilemmas. He says, that ‘a conflict of duties and obligations is inconceivable’ on the grounds that the rules expressing moral duty declare certain actions to be ‘necessary’ and that two rules declaring actions necessary cannot conflict. ‘Thus, if it is a duty, and hence a moral necessity, that a person do A, then it cannot also be a duty, and hence a moral necessity, that the person do something incompatible with A. Kant acknowledges that there can be conflicting “grounds of obligation.” But in such case one of the grounds is not a sufficient ground. Hence, there are not two conflicting obligations, one of which prevails, but two conflicting grounds of obligations, one of which prevails; the result is that there is only one actual obligation.’³⁴⁰ Bernard William’s objection (which will be further discussed below) that the fact that there is a moral remainder in the form of ‘regret’ when someone has to choose between these conflicting obligations, and thus the conflict cannot only be apparent, is in turn rejected by Kantians with the argument that there is no need to attribute moral dilemmas in order to justify powerful negative sentiments in these cases. In other words, regret or guilt from the agent’s part does not entail moral conflict. Loyal to the rational and progressive spirit of the Enlightenment Kantians would argue that moral sentiments are irrelevant to moral understanding.³⁴¹ In conclusion, the Kantian approach to moral theory cannot accept moral dilemmas because it is based on a very austere system of prioritizing moral principles and consequent obligations and duties: actions that are neither morally necessary nor morally impossible are “morally indifferent” or “permissible.” ‘These three categories

³³⁹ Gowans, ‘The Debate on Moral Dilemmas’, 4.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 6.

³⁴¹ Earl Conee, ‘Against Moral Dilemmas’, in Gowans (ed.), *Moral Dilemmas*, 247.

–the necessary, the impossible, and the permissible– are taken to be exclusive and exhaustive: every action falls into one and only one.’³⁴²

The Kantian rejection of moral dilemmas appears to be problematic and over-simplistic. This over-simplification can be more striking within the world of politics which usually raises the most acute cases of conflicting values. The Kantian (deontic) reasoning will, sooner or later, have to confront Weber’s criticism against the ‘absolute ethic’. In practical situations, in politics in particular, the attitude of deontology against irresolvable moral dilemmas will cause problems of moral consistency which can only be resolved by absolute means. In addition, and maybe philosophically more important, deontic theories must face the ancient problem of moral arbitrariness. On what epistemological basis can one assign moral priority to some ‘ground of obligation’ over another? How do deontologists justify the rejection of moral conflicts? If their assumptions derive from some religious ancestry then how do they justify the transition from theistic presuppositions to a rationality which is sufficient against moral dilemmas?³⁴³

Utilitarian theories are more interesting than Kantian theories in this particular respect, because utilitarianism claims to have the only solution against moral arbitrariness.³⁴⁴ Because of this powerful claim against moral arbitrariness, utilitarianism (as a form of the wider concept of consequentialism) has been considered as the only viable unitary political solution against moral fragmentation. As we have seen, in almost all ethical arguments in politics from Plato onwards, the calculation of consequences is considered to be both an indispensable ability for the political man, but also a dangerous political path if not otherwise morally restrained. If in ordinary life morality is characterized by unavoidable conflict of principles of conduct, and not a harmony of purposes, then the question is whether it is reasonable to impose moral unity by allowing only one overriding principle of conduct.³⁴⁵ For this is what classical utilitarianism attempted to do: to suggest that utility is the moral principle that comes to fill in the gaps of a moral system that has not devised resolutions in cases of moral conflicts. Mill says ‘If utility is the ultimate source of moral obligations, utility may be invoked to decide between them when their demands are incompatible.’³⁴⁶

³⁴² Gowans, ‘The Debate on Moral Dilemmas’, 6.

³⁴³ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 64–65.

³⁴⁴ John Stuart Mill, ‘Utilitarianism and Moral Conflicts’, in Gowans (ed.), *Moral Dilemmas*, 54.

³⁴⁵ Stuart Hampshire, ‘Public and Private Morality’, in Stuart Hampshire (ed.), *Public and Private Morality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1978), 42.

³⁴⁶ Mill, ‘Utilitarianism and Moral Conflicts’, 55.

Utility, thus, appears to be an overarching or primary principle according to which all moral conflicts can be perfectly resolved. However, the most consistent criticism against this perception of utility has pointed out that it is virtually impossible to define and defend utility as a homogeneous value to which all morally relevant considerations may be reduced. If some accepted this, they would end up with an implausible reductionism. If some, on the other hand, accepted the heterogeneity of utility, they would forego its purported advantage in resolving conflicts.³⁴⁷ In other words, either the primacy of the utility principle over all other moral principles should make utilitarianism a monistic and ultimately reductionist theory –we shall see how this seems to be a paradox for utilitarianism in the field of politics at a later stage– or the utility principle will be one more principle, among others, with equal strength. Thus, utilitarianism should not be able to claim an extra capacity to resolving moral conflicts –which is more or less what the pluralist argument is based upon.

In the contemporary discussion, R. M. Hare has tried to elaborate the classical utilitarian position, by adopting an Aristotelian approach regarding the essence of moral theory and moral conduct in order to uphold the view that real moral dilemmas are impossible when there is a systematic way to face apparent conflicts of principle and obligations. We shall see that despite these added Aristotelian features, which make for a more sophisticated utilitarian approach to the problem of moral dilemmas, Hare's theory is still based upon the conception of utility as the definitive moral guide and thus susceptible to the same kind of criticism as exposed above. Thus, the importance of Hare's argument to the current inquiry is twofold: first, in relation to the Aristotelian characteristics of his utilitarian theory; and second, in relation to the philosophical assumptions of the utilitarian viewpoint. Hare's main theoretical tool is a distinction between two levels of moral thinking; a distinction that according to him is not original since it occurs already in Plato and Aristotle. The seeds of this distinction are to be found in Plato's distinction between knowledge and right opinion. Then the same concept reappears in Aristotle's distinction between right motivation and practical wisdom or, as we have seen, moral virtue and intellectual virtue.³⁴⁸ Hare argues that the importance of this distinction has not yet been realized. However, as we are about to argue, his attempt to infuse it with the overriding utilitarian principle has failed to add to Aristotle's theory something substantial in order to achieve this.

³⁴⁷ Gowans, 'The Debate on Moral Dilemmas', 8.

³⁴⁸ R. M. Hare, 'Moral Conflicts', in Gowans (ed.), *Moral Dilemmas*, 205.

These two levels of moral thinking, as Hare names them, are the intuitive and the critical. Both of them are concerned with moral questions of substance, but they handle them in a different way. And in order to understand this difference it is necessary to compare them while discussing the problem of moral conflicts. The argument goes like this:

The views held by moral philosophers about conflicts of duties are an extremely good diagnostic of the comprehensiveness and penetration of their thought about morality; superficiality is perhaps more quickly revealed by what is said about this problem than in any other way. Those who say, roundly, that there can just be irresolvable conflicts of duties are always those who have confined their thinking about morality to the intuitive level. At this level the conflicts are indeed irresolvable; but at the critical level there is a requirement that we resolve the conflict, unless we are to confess that our thinking has been incomplete. We are not thinking critically if we just say 'There is a conflict of duties; I ought to do *A*, and I ought to do *B*, and I can't do both'. But at the intuitive level it is perfectly permissible to say this.³⁴⁹

Now, this may seem at first similar to the Kantian account against moral dilemmas as discussed above, since both traditions share the idea that moral theory and thus moral conduct is perfectible: if some persons' moral thinking has not 'progressed' enough as to be able to create a systematic and comprehensive prioritization of moral principles and obligations they would inevitably face apparent moral conflicts. However, the similarities between Kantianism and Utilitarianism stop in their monistic approach. For Kantian theorists a strict prioritization of *prima facie* principles some of which are just inviolable (and all of them are guided by the categorical imperative) would be enough, whereas for utilitarians only the principle of utility can be called definitive, since otherwise moral conflicts would be unavoidable. In such cases, Hare argues, the problem arises from the fact that these persons have confined their moral education into only developing their moral characters: the Aristotelian moral habituation, or *ethos*. This habituation only cultivates the intuitive level of moral thinking (which is based upon *prima facie* principles) and thus when a conflict of intuitions is faced, it is impossible to be resolved by recourse to moral thinking, because by moral habit these persons have learnt that most of those basic moral intuitions are of equal importance.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 206.

According to Hare, who in turn follows Aristotle, in such a conflict between intuitions, it is time to call in reason.³⁵⁰ Actually, it is necessary to ‘call in reason’, he says, because ‘No two situations and no two people are ever exactly like each other’. This means that, although the relatively simple principles that are used at the intuitive level are necessary for human moral thinking to exist in the first place (like Aristotle argued that moral habituation is the first kind of moral education that must be implemented), they are not sufficient. New situations arise all the time and they must be morally evaluated and the principles we have learnt habitually in dealing with past situations may not be appropriate to or sufficient for the new one. So, Hare continues, there is an additional question of how we are to decide whether they are appropriate or not; and whether we should create new principles in order to cover the new situations; this is why we develop our intellectual or critical thinking. Therefore:

The most fundamental objection to the one-level account of moral thinking called intuitionism is that it yields no way of answering such a question. The intuitive level of moral thinking certainly exists and is (humanly speaking) an essential part of the whole structure; but however well equipped we are with these relatively simple, *prima facie*, intuitive principles or dispositions, we are bound to find ourselves in situations in which they conflict and in which, therefore, some other, nonintuitive kind of thinking is called for, to resolve the conflict. The intuitions which give rise to the conflict are the product of our upbringings and past experience of decision-making [moral habituation]. They are not self-justifying; we can always ask whether the upbringing was the best we could have, or whether the past decisions were the right ones [...] To use intuition itself to answer such questions is a viciously circular procedure[.]³⁵¹

However, if developing moral intuitions, or moral characters, through habituation is a necessary element of our moral thinking, it follows, according to Hare, that we ask how the intuitive is related to the critical level of moral thinking, since these two are not rival procedures but they are elements in a common structure, each with its part to play. Their interrelation can be understood, he says, by using Aristotle’s metaphor regarding the relation of the intellect to the character (both of which constitute the two levels of moral development as Hare explained above). Aristotle argues that this relation *has to be* a paternal one: ‘in so far as a man’s motives and dispositions are rational, it is because they “listen to reason as to a father”’. Because intuitive moral thinking cannot

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 211.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 217-218.

be self-supporting, whereas critical thinking can be and is, the latter is epistemologically prior.³⁵²

What Hare is trying to achieve here is of course a reconstruction of what Aristotle, and other philosophers of the classical period, suggested; i.e. that reason is epistemologically prior to intuitive thinking, based on a specific ontological conception of human nature. Hare claims that at the end of critical thinking (i.e. at its perfect state) all questions on which moral argument is possible would be given a perfectly consistent answer which, by the way, would be the same in every place at every time. For this reason the *prima facie* principles themselves have to be selected by critical thinking, provided, of course, that critical thinking has in turn been developed to its perfection based upon the ‘best’ *prima facie* principles (creating thus a causality problem: how could we choose the best *prima facie* principles since those are needed to develop critical thinking in the first place?). In conclusion, Hare’s political argument is that if not all people are able in developing their critical thinking to its perfection (so as to be able to separate it from the intuitive level and command it accordingly), they should trust the selection of *prima facie principles* those who can do it.³⁵³ In platonic terms, we still need philosopher-kings to construct, non-intuitively, a political system of moral education for the rest of us. Again, the major problem, recognized by Plato himself and later by Aristotle, is how we can initiate such a process without a leap of logic similar to the ‘discovery’ of Ideal Forms.

How then can we justify Hare’s idealist conclusion about the character of moral theory and morality itself? Someone might expect a more moderate view starting from Aristotelian premises. The answer is to be found in the fact that Hare still wants to construct an argument about the overarching character of the utility principle which would simplify the moral conundrum and allow for a perfect moral theory. Plato’s leap of logic is not necessary because we now have utility as the decisive factor. ‘Critical thinking’, he says, ‘aims to select the best set of *prima facie* principles for use in intuitive thinking. It can also be employed when principles from the set conflict *per accidents*.’ These accidents will arise only in ‘exceptional situations’ and they will be agonizing in proportion because they are deeply held due to proper moral habituation.³⁵⁴ For utilitarians, and Hare, the ‘best set’ of *prima facie* principles should be selected according to the consequences of inculcating them in ourselves and others; ‘and, in

³⁵² Ibid., 222.

³⁵³ Ibid., 223.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 225-226.

examining these consequences, we have to balance the size of the good and bad effects in cases which we consider against the probability or improbability of such cases occurring in our actual experience.’³⁵⁵ Nevertheless, following this kind of reasoning, choosing the ‘best set’ of *prima facie* principles becomes both a highly experimental and arbitrary process.

It should be obvious then that Hare’s intention was to take advantage of the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom and, without its ontological and teleological assumptions, to construct a moral theory based on the utility principle. In his interpretation ‘critical thinking’ is fundamentally determined by a calculative capacity which makes ‘practical decisions’ morally indisputable and the whole process of moral systematization simpler. This allowed him to accept the interrelation between the intuitive and the critical levels of moral thinking, but at the same time it permitted him to claim the epistemological priority of the critical level –which in this case is based upon the calculative capacity and not upon a specific ontological conception of human nature, as in Aristotelian ethics.

The utilitarian attempt is not without its merits. Firstly, it tries to disconnect morality from the question of how one should live a life, making thus moral theory tantamount to scientific method, through abstraction. Secondly, utilitarianism poses a serious problem by inserting calculation into our habitual responses and internalized dispositions.³⁵⁶ Prudence, a fundamental political and moral virtue is based upon this careful weighing of intuitions and their consequences, and by inserting calculation in the equation Hare seeks to extinguish the Aristotelian ambiguity regarding the relationship between the moral and the intellectual parts of our characters. However, it is this attempt to abolish all ambiguity which constitutes the problem of the utilitarian theory, even after Hare’s endeavour to reconstruct it on Aristotelian premises: the calculation of consequences as the definitive principle of moral thinking underestimates the complexity of the world in relation to the complexity of moral agency; something that both Plato and Aristotle acknowledged as a major philosophical problem which required radical political solutions. If this complexity is reduced to an ability to foresee outcomes the Aristotelian practical wisdom is reduced to mere *prudence*, which does not, by itself, entail that there cannot be moral conflicts. ‘The good general’, Hare says in a concluding political observation that summarizes his whole point, ‘is one who wins

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 224.

³⁵⁶ Hampshire, ‘Public and Private Morality’, 30, 37.

his battles, not one who has the best *prima facie* principles; but the best *prima facie* principles are those which, on the whole, win battles.³⁵⁷

Hare's example is a forceful attempt to reveal the interdependence between principle and utility and to show how in final analysis their reconciliation can be achieved. His conclusion, however, seems to be a circular argument, where the priority of the overarching principle is not clear since it is based upon another set of necessary principles. Hare's argument is reminiscent of the debate in relation to Machiavelli's *virtù* as a skill that brings temporal results based on the calculation of consequences and 'virtue' which is the ability to redefine political success in the long term based on stable moral principles. It is essentially Hare's answer to the problem of whether 'the end justifies the means'. But as we have already argued neither Plato nor Aristotle were ready to make such concessions. The path towards moral perfectionism, if based upon the concept of utility, has always been regarded with great political concern and philosophical suspicion. Plato and Aristotle's legacy to political thought in the 'classical sense' is that an interest-based morality will sooner or later abolish any moral restraints. Sooner or later, Hampshire agrees, the error of absolutism made by the optimistic utilitarian leads to the exploitation of man by man.³⁵⁸

C) The pluralist argument: the incommensurability of moral values and the political danger from absolutism

Practical wisdom, which is the outcome of perfect moral habituation (of a specific social type) and rigorous intellectual education (again, with a specific moral and political aim), was for Aristotle only a possibility depending on man's moral capacities, and within specific moral and political contexts. It was never a way of forever resolving all moral debates. Thus, it is possible to criticize Hare's utilitarian argument not only from an intuitionist perspective, according to which our fundamental intuitions cannot be overridden by utility, but also from an Aristotelian and a pluralist perspective. Aristotle himself suggested a strong interrelation between the development of moral and intellectual virtues. For Aristotle moral habituation (which is strongly connected to the life of the *polis*) is chronically prior whereas intellectual habituation (which an individual's affair) is epistemologically prior. In this respect, Hare's interpretation of Aristotle, and thus his own argument are correct. However, Aristotle implied that

³⁵⁷ Hare, 'Moral Conflicts', 227.

³⁵⁸ Hampshire, 'Public and Private Morality', 18.

human nature imposes some certain limits onto our intellectual capacities, something that Hare seems to neglect when he refers to the equivalent ‘critical level of thinking’. He is of course ambiguous on this point, but it may be through this ambiguity that we infer the conclusion of his argument, as we have already seen: that is, that intellectual activity can never be perfected up to the point of being self-supporting because man is by nature a political-dependent animal. This is the reason man created the *polis* in the first place; because consequences of human actions greatly depend upon external –to human abilities– factors. Thus, if due to such a factor a practically wise general lost a battle –to return to Hare’s own example– this does not mean he is no longer wise. External conditions and natural necessities had their significant role to play within a man’s struggle towards *eudaimonia* but they did not define his moral and intellectual character; that was totally depended upon his human powers, which are nevertheless insufficient. To argue that one’s miscalculation of a course of action (moral and practical at the same time) makes one’s moral character culpable, would be, for Aristotle, the abandonment of the significance of moral agency towards the achievement of the ideal life; or better, the life that the ancients aspired to.

The pluralist criticism against utilitarianism, and Hare’s theory in particular, is similar, if not derived from, this Aristotelian interpretation. According to Hampshire, utilitarians, who consider utility as the ultimate criterion for resolving moral problems, think that men have the possibility of indefinite improvement in their moral thinking. And that thus far they were confined and confused by their innate endowments of moral repugnances and emotional admirations. An opposite way of thinking about morality, according to him, is outlined by Aristotelian ethics which might appear, as we have already discussed in detail, as a recognition of a plurality of prohibitions –absolute and non-absolute– and elementary decencies which do not all derive from a united source and do not all serve a single purpose: the only definite element behind them is a particular way of life.³⁵⁹ This is a good way to observe how the transition from monistic explanations of morality to the school of thought which accepts moral dilemmas is made. For pluralists, moral conflicts constitute the essence of morality exactly because the plurality of values in human life is irreducible:

The phrase ‘way of life’ is vague and is chosen for its vagueness. The unity of a single way of life, and the compatibility in practice of different habits and dispositions, are learnt from observation, direct experience and from psychology and history; we know that human

³⁵⁹ Stuart Hampshire, ‘Morality and Pessimism’, in Hampshire (ed.), *Public and Private Morality*, 15-16.

nature naturally varies, and is deliberately variable, only within limits; and that not all theoretically compatible achievements and enjoyments are compatible in normal circumstances [...] The moral prohibitions constitute a kind of grammar of conduct, showing the elements out of which any fully respectable conduct, as one conceives it, must be built. The plurality of absolute prohibitions, and the looseness of their association with any way of life, which stresses a certain set of virtues, is to be contrasted with the unity and the simplicity of utilitarian ethics.³⁶⁰

Plurality of values due to the 'way of life' is not the only way to explain the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas, but it is the most relevant, at least, in relation to politics. There is also the argument from single-value conflicts, which suggests that, for example, considering the principle that innocent lives are to be saved, there might be an occasion in which it is possible to save one life or another but not both. In each case, a single principle enjoins incompatible actions. It is not possible to analyze in detail this last argument about single-value conflicts, but it should suffice for our purposes (which are mainly related to the political) to say that in relation to practical difficulties which derive from an uneasiness in applying a single moral principle, monistic reasoning appears to be insurmountable.³⁶¹ In such cases, there is not a moral dilemma but only an anguished practical matter, a tragic situation: we do not have to override a moral principle based on a higher moral demand, because there is no other moral demand. Thus, by deciding according to a calculation of actual consequences, we do not at the same time override one of two moral *oughts*; we only decide which is the best practical way of applying one and single moral principle.

The serious problem arises when there is a clear conflict between different and equally strong moral principles which cannot be reduced to the utility principle at the theoretical level. In such a case the practical application becomes simply impossible, or impossible without a moral 'remainder.' Thus, within the concept of 'moral conflicts' there is also the argument from moral sentiment –which is nevertheless not clearly separated from value pluralism. This is based on a claim about the explanation of the sentiments of regret (or remorse or guilt) that are meant to occur in the wake of practical resolutions of moral conflict and it is developed, as we have already mentioned, in Williams' theory about moral conflicts.³⁶² Because of this, Williams' argument with regard to moral sentiment can be connected with the pluralist tradition. Like pluralists have done, he has tended to be sceptical of resolutions, or methods of resolving,

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 12-14.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 19.

³⁶² Gowans, 'The Debate on Moral Dilemmas', 14.

conflicting values. Pluralists' general idea is that a conflict between moral claims is natural to us, and that there are contrary dispositions and many things that are immediately admirable and desirable in themselves, and for which the price is sometimes too high and prioritization impossible.³⁶³ If this were not so, human existence would not be tragic and politics would not be such a disputed field of social conduct.

De Wijze has taken the argument about the moral remainder even further in order to stress the importance of the acceptance of moral dilemmas for the agents involved:

The prime reason is to restore balance in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition where emotions are very often seen as standing in opposition to rationality and consequently of no use in our search for ethical principles [...] Yet despite this, emotions do play an important part in our moral evaluations and do so for two important reasons. Firstly, by focusing on moral emotions, at least in their non-corrupted forms, this helps us towards understanding the parameters of moral violation and directs the philosophical analyses needed to develop clear and coherent ethical principles [...] Secondly, even if moral emotions are only the starting point for a proper and rational ethical judgment, given the speed and complexity of some human interaction, our properly honed and cultivated moral emotions can serve as a substitute for moral deliberation, and act as a careful guide to those involved in weighty moral decisions.³⁶⁴

Gowans has made a distinction between two main schools of thought among pluralists, that might already have been inferred by the analysis of the basic elements of pluralism: either someone accepts that in cases of moral conflicts there is a resolution to be discovered, and is simply a comment on our epistemic inadequacies that we are unable to discover it; or someone claims that some values are “incommensurable” and thus it is impossible in principle to resolve conflicts among them (it is not simply that we cannot discover the resolution: there is no resolution to be discovered).³⁶⁵ The problem at hand, is how these morally dilemmatic situations translate into politics where no ‘resolution’ is possible. For Hare, and utilitarians in general, ‘resolution’ of a moral conflict means elimination of the conflict altogether. For pluralists who accept the existence of genuine moral dilemmas ‘resolution’ does not mean elimination of the dilemma, but a necessary practical overcoming of it, which nevertheless leaves a moral remainder in recognition of the fact that the conflict was real and it will remain

³⁶³ Hampshire, ‘Public and Private Morality’, 43.

³⁶⁴ De Wijze, ‘Tragic Remorse’, 458.

³⁶⁵ Gowans, ‘The Debate on Moral Dilemmas’, 18.

unsolved.³⁶⁶ In other words they recognize the necessity for a political ‘resolution’ but at the same time the impossibility of a moral ‘resolution.’

[I]t is surely falsifying of moral thought to represent its logic that in a conflict situation one of the conflicting *ought*'s must be totally rejected. One must, certainly, be rejected in the sense that not both can be acted upon; and this gives a (fairly weak) sense to saying that they are incompatible. But this does not mean they do not both (actually) apply to the *situation*; or that I was in some way mistaken in thinking that these were both things that I ought to do. I may continue to think this retrospectively, and hence have regrets; and I may even do this when I have found some moral reason for acting on one in preference to the other [...] but this is not the same as to revise or reconsider the reasons for the original *ought*'s[.]³⁶⁷

What should logically follow from this argument is that in political matters the argument of ‘incommensurability,’ as mainly suggested by Thomas Nagel and is to be analyzed presently, should unavoidably come to terms with Williams’ position about the ‘moral remainder.’ Williams’ argument thus is complementary to the pluralistic approach in both worlds of politics and morality, but especially in politics where a ‘non-resolution’ situation is out of the question. In other words, if we, like Gowans, accept a distinction between pluralist theories which claim that there are moral dilemmas which are resolvable (but with a “remainder”) and those which claim that they are not resolvable (because of “incommensurability”), we should concede that in politics this distinction is more irrelevant. Even if the pluralism of moral values is recognized, it is also recognized that sometimes politics necessitates overriding these values, even if momentarily. This process is not the outcome of simple utilitarian reasoning (although it contains strong elements of it). How and why this is happening we are going to discuss later on. The important thing for now is to make clear that pluralism of values does not entail impossibility of political action, though it does entail a different understanding of it, of which the ‘moral remainder’ is an important feature.

The main features of the pluralist approach are expressed by Nagel’s strong claim that moral values are simply “incommensurable” and therefore the resulting moral conflicts are definitely not resolvable, at least at the moral level; and if they are resolvable at the practical level then they are so only with massive effects to the way politics works and the way *we* should judge politics. The main implication of this

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 18.

³⁶⁷ Bernard Williams, ‘Ethical Consistency’, in Gowans (ed.), *Moral Dilemmas*, 134.

argument is that systematic moral theory cannot constitute the sole basis for moral conduct. However, irreducible moral conflicts create a moral framework within which political resolutions must be limited. The fact that in politics a practical resolution is necessary does not make the initial moral conflict of secondary importance. Instead, it is the knowledge of the conflict itself that should impose some limits on how the practical resolution is conceived and realized. This should be the guide to judging when the ‘end justifies the means’ and when it does not; calculative reasoning is not sufficient. How are we to decide whether the good of justice is higher than the good of peace? There is no obvious common ground for such comparative judgments, and this suggests that these values are incommensurable. If this is the case, pluralists argue, that there are irresolvable moral conflicts and cases where an action cannot be incontestably considered as the best. For this reason, whenever an action is undertaken, it should be severely checked and maybe restrained. For example, how should one act when to preserve peace one may need to violate justice, and vice versa? According to Gowans, when in a given situation it is not clear that one action is the best, it does not follow that in that situation any action is as good or as bad as any other.³⁶⁸ The obvious outcome of this argument is ontological in nature; i.e., and without implying a pure relativism, there are limits to the objectivity of our moral capacities, but these do not reduce the significance of moral judgment; something that, as we are about to see, makes even clearer the importance of the relationship between the moral agent and the ‘moral remainder.’

Nagel’s pluralism derives from exactly this problem of the incommensurability of values and the necessity for resolution of moral dilemmas. Nagel argues that the problem derives from the disparity between the *fragmentation of value* and the *singleness* of decision. The conflict at the moral level gives rise to the conflict at the practical level, which is not the same as merely having a practical difficulty. The necessity of practical resolution entails neither a permanent overriding of one of the moral principles, nor a reduction of the importance of the moral conflict itself –as monistic approaches may suggest. A practical difficulty, when faced, will not test the moral capacity of the agent because it is usually the outcome of external factors and not of a moral conflict –following, again, Aristotle’s philosophy and the criticism we made against the reductive tendencies of utilitarianism. Nagel argues, corroborating what has been said so far that:

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 29.

The strongest cases of conflict are genuine dilemmas, where there is a decisive support for two or more incompatible courses of action or inaction. In that case a decision will still be necessary, but it will seem necessarily arbitrary. When two choices are very evenly balanced [in terms of comparable moral values], it does not matter which choice one makes, and arbitrariness is no problem. But when each seems right for reasons that appear decisive and sufficient, arbitrariness means the lack of reasons where reasons are needed, since either choice will mean acting against some reasons without being able to claim that they are *outweighed*.³⁶⁹

According to Nagel there are five fundamental types of moral values that give rise to basic conflict and create practical dilemmas along with moral dilemmas. First, there are specific obligations to other people or institutions. Second, there are constraints on action deriving from general rights that everyone has, either to do certain things or not to be treated in certain ways. Third there is that which is technically called utility (which includes all aspects of benefit and harm to all people). Fourth there is the type which refers to perfectionist ends or values and by this Nagel means the intrinsic value of certain achievements or creations, apart from their value *to* individuals who experience or use them. Finally, there is the type of commitments to one's own projects or undertakings (not to be confused with self-interest), which is a value in addition to whatever reasons may have led to them in the first place.³⁷⁰ According to Nagel, obligations, rights, utility, perfectionist ends, and private commitments enter into our decisions constantly. Conflicts amongst those types of values, and within them, arise in medical research, in personal life, and of course –in exaggerated form– in politics. Now the crux of his argument is basically a summary of the criticism against Kantian absolutism and utilitarianism as developed above– that criticism may be applied to every monistic explanation of morality and politics. What would it mean to give a system of priorities among all those conflicting values? What would it mean to construct a moral system based upon a monistic philosophical explanation? According to Nagel the answer would be further theoretical and practical confusion and a predicament for the moral agent accordingly.

The simpler moral conception which follows the Kantian tradition might permit a solution in terms of a short list of clear prohibitions and injunctions, with the balance of decision left to personal preference or discretion, but that will not work with such a mixed collection of moral values (because, as we have analyzed, this would

³⁶⁹ Thomas Nagel, 'The Fragmentation of Value', in Gowans (ed.), *Moral Dilemmas*, 175.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 175-176.

underestimate the complexity of life and the world). Such a method of decision is absurd, according to Nagel, not because of the particular order in which the prohibitions might have been chosen, but because of its absoluteness. It is absurd, he says, to hold that obligations can never outweigh rights, or that utility, however justified, can never outweigh obligation. We have already discussed the difficulties of this tradition particularly in relation to politics where the calculation of consequences, and thus the idea of utility, is of special importance. Nagel does not neglect the peculiar character of politics and for this reason turns his attention to *the idea of outweighing*, or, in more familiar terms, the principle of utility. Utilitarianism, he argues, is the best example of a theory which tries to rationalize a decision in conditions of conflict, based on a single scale on which all these apparently disparate considerations can be measured, added, and balanced. And the interesting thing, he finds, is that attempts have been made not only in order to show the priority of the utility principle over rights and obligations, but also in order to prove the priority of rights and obligations over utility in utilitarian terms. ‘The same might be tried for perfectionist goals and personal commitments.’³⁷¹

Thus, regarding the essence of morality, the absurdity of Kantian absolutism reappears in utilitarian reasoning. This absurdity can be explained in theoretical terms, because, Nagel claims, if we study the classification of values into the above different types, we should realize that the source of value is not unitary ‘displaying apparent multiplicity only in its application to the world.’ His argument is in essence almost identical to Weber’s concept of ‘plurality of values’ as a consequence of the variety of ‘life orders’. Value, in Nagel’s view, has different kinds of sources, which correspond to the above classification and can be reduced to two categories: the personal (or “agent-centred”) and the impersonal (or “outcome-centred”). Again this classification of value pluralism under two central categories of values seems to be a contemporary version of Weber’s distinction between the ‘ethic of conviction’ and the ‘ethic of responsibility’.

The first category, which can also be described as ‘subjective’, entails moral reasons that in each case apply primarily to the individual involved, as reasons particularly for *him* (for example to fulfil his obligations or to defend his rights). This does not mean that it is not objectively (or ‘impersonally’) a morally valued thing that people’s right should not be violated, but it means that for an individual this is a secondary motive, i.e. not so powerful as the reason one has not to violate anyone’s rights directly. (That is why Nagel’s own example is illuminating here: it is reasonable for defenders of civil liberties to object to police and judicial practices that violate the

³⁷¹ Ibid., 177.

rights of criminal suspects, even when the aim of those policies is to prevent greater violations by criminals of the rights of their victims). The second, ‘outcome-centred’ category claims (which include the claims of utility and perfectionist ends) have to do with what happens, and not, in the first instance, with what one does. It is the contribution of what one does to what happens or what is achieved that matters.³⁷² The overarching principle of utility becomes, therefore, one simple type of values among others, which is classified under the more general category of ‘impersonal’ claims.

This great division between personal and impersonal, or between agent-centered and outcome-centered, or subjective and objective reasons, is so basic that it renders implausible any reductive unification of ethics –let alone of practical reasoning in general. The formal differences among these types of reasons correspond to deep differences in their sources. We appreciate the force of impersonal reasons when we detach from our personal situation and our special relations to others [...] But when conflict occurs between them, the problem is still more difficult. Conflicts between personal and impersonal claims are ubiquitous. They cannot, in my view, be resolved by subsuming either of the points of view under the other, or both under a third. Nor can we simply abandon any of them. There is no reason why we should. The capacity to view the world simultaneously from the point of view of one’s relations to others, from the point of view of one’s life extended through time, from the point of view of everyone at once, and finally from the detached viewpoint often described as the view *sub specie aeternitatis* is one of the marks of humanity. This complex capacity is an obstacle to unification.³⁷³

There are striking similarities between Nagel and Hare’s arguments which nevertheless derive from a fundamentally different understanding regarding the essence and the purpose of morality. Both thinkers demand that we recognize a basic distinction between two levels of moral thinking: one concerned with the importance of action for the agents themselves; and one concerned with the importance of an action’s consequences overall. In both theories the conclusion is that a practical resolution will be necessary whether or not we accept the existence of genuine moral dilemmas. However, because Hare argues for the imperfectability of the intuitive level and the perfectibility of the critical level, he assigns epistemological priority to the latter which literally means that whatever insoluble conflicts arise from the intuitive level should necessarily be resolved at the critical level. Nevertheless, at this point Nagel poses two questions: first, why we should presume the perfectibility of the critical –as opposed to

³⁷² Ibid., 178-179.

³⁷³ Ibid., 179-180.

the imperfectability of the intuitive level; and second, why we should presume its epistemological priority. The distinction between the moral and the rational, made here by Hare, following Aristotle, is not rejected by pluralism. But pluralism derives from the claim (implied again by Aristotle and from the realist arguments of Plato) that rationalism is a limited human capacity, something utilitarians seem to overlook. Naturally, the outcome is a different understanding of what moral judgement is and thus of what morality itself is.

Hare claims that at the end of critical thinking (i.e. at the perfect intellectual state when practical wisdom is achieved) all moral arguments would be given a perfectly consistent answer which, by the way, would be the same in every place at every time. Nagel, on the other hand, claims that Aristotle described as practical wisdom the faculty 'which reveals over time in individual decisions rather than in the enunciation of general principles. It will not always yield a solution: there are true practical dilemmas that have no solution, and there are also conflicts so complex that judgment cannot operate confidently.'³⁷⁴ This different interpretation of Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom derives from his ambiguity with regard to the relation between moral and intellectual virtues. However, we have already argued that from an overall reading of Aristotle's political philosophy there is a clear implication that intellectual virtue is not perfectible in reality and for the same reason practical wisdom is not the end of all moral problems. This is why politics is a necessary feature of human life and is so strongly connected to *phronesis*.

Against what Hare suggested, there cannot be a comprehensive solution to the problem of conflicting moral claims and practical resolutions, by inserting the principle of utility as a moral catalyst. Pluralism is in principle against 'abstract and computational' moral theories because their monistic character suggests the end of moral problems. Hampshire argues that absolute in 'absolute moral claims' and 'Overriding' in utilitarian terms need explanation³⁷⁵ and Nagel is right in saying that monistic philosophical views have failed to offer a satisfying theoretical explanation. There is no reason why someone should argue that we have witnessed substantial moral progress in a general sense. Indeed, we might have witnessed some progress in the contextual understanding of moral attitudes, but the intellectual and moral complexity of things (in an Aristotelian and Weberian sense) appears to be always the same. The complexity of social organization is the one that has changed and all moral theory can

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 180.

³⁷⁵ Hampshire, 'Public and Private Morality', 40-41.

do is to understand this change and explain the moral confusion derived from it; but it cannot change the essence of morality. Pluralism of moral values implies a clear distinction between natural knowledge, which can and should progress, and moral knowledge that can only progress in terms of understanding (a progress not to be underestimated though).

D) Modern moral philosophy: Relativistic and pluralistic explanations of morality

We have examined the basic features of the modern debate between philosophical monism and pluralism and, so far, we have argued in favour of a pluralist understanding of morality. Pluralists argue that the Weberian ‘fragmentation of morality’ is a real problem based on the conflict among different and incommensurable values. These values can be generally classified with reference to the dichotomy between ‘agent-centred’ and ‘outcome-centred’ moral standpoints. According to Michael Stocker, it is necessary to clarify and understand those conflicts and their categorisations, but the starting point and the simplest argument in favour of moral pluralism is that ‘value, taken quite generally, is plural’. Thus, ‘Quite generally, if plurality entrains difficulties for sound judgement, we are faced with those difficulties.’³⁷⁶ Necessarily then, we have been arguing, such an approach to the nature of morality entails an argument against monism. From the pluralist perspective, monism seems ‘incapable of allowing us to make sense of our moral life, and more generally our evaluative life’ because ‘many, if not most, ordinary choices involve plural values’, rendering moral decisions problematic and sometimes simply impossible.³⁷⁷ Monism has always been attractive precisely because it promises always possible and unproblematic moral judgments, in a scientific and provable moral theory. A pluralistic conception of morality, instead, rejects ‘the moral importance of what is impossible’.³⁷⁸ In short, the problem with monism is that it promises a morally coherent evaluating system, which can only apply to a morally good world; but the reality is that our world is not a good world: hence monism is an impossibility.³⁷⁹

Let us now turn briefly to another modern philosophical approach to the nature of morality which is the exact opposite of monism. This is what in contemporary political philosophy we call moral relativism and some aspect of it has already been

³⁷⁶ Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values*, Clarendon Press, Oxford (1990), 167.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 276.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

indicated in Thrasymachus' first *amoral* or cynical response to Plato's questions about morality. It is also implied (but not defended) in Aristotle's contextualist understanding of political constitutions and in Weber's idea of 'moral disenchantment' in the modern world. Whether moral relativism as a philosophical approach is viable and what are its political implications are questions that cannot be examined in depth in this thesis. However, it is important to review its main features and juxtapose them to monistic and pluralistic approaches to morality in order to acquire a fuller understanding of the concept of conflicting values and the possibility for sound moral and political judgment. It is also useful in corroborating the pluralist argument that the monistic perspective is not feasible. This section, therefore, is a kind of parenthesis, in which I also wish to distinguish pluralism from a symmetric position of that of monism. When it is clear that pluralism and relativism should not be confused it will be easier to resume the main argument in favour of pluralism and against monism. Thus, according to John Kekes, if we accept that there is, even if only apparently, a 'plurality of modes of reflection'³⁸⁰ in relation to moral affairs, due to the fragmentation of values and the division of the moral standpoints, the absolutist would solve the apparent philosophical problem by giving precedence to one of the modes of reflection whose conflict causes the problems.³⁸¹ As analysed previously, this evaluative monism is based on a conception of moral reasoning that understands that some values are generally better in all contexts and thus we can assign them overriding priority.

Moral relativism, on the other hand, accepts that diversity of values and their conflicting nature are not only apparent but very real and insuperable. From this, for a relativist, we can infer that there is no such thing as *the Truth*.³⁸² Hence, according to Steven Lukes, relativists argue that anyone's moral views and practices are historically formed and local. They believe 'that we cannot step outside our moral world, which is only one among others, and that our judgements of those inhabiting other such worlds can therefore have no special claim on them, and can only appear to them as ethnocentrism or moral imperialism on our part, or both'.³⁸³ Thus, ultimately, for the relativist all values seem to be conventional and, Kekes argues, 'what values people accept depends on the context in which they were born, on their genetic inheritance and subsequent experiences, on the political, cultural, economic, and religious influences on

³⁸⁰ John Kekes, *Pluralism in Philosophy: Changing the Subject*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London (2000), 49.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁸² Simon Blackburn, *The Big Questions: Philosophy*, Quercus Publishing, London (2009), 104.

³⁸³ Steven Lukes, *Moral Relativism*, Profile Books, London (2008), x.

them; in short, what they value depends on their subjective attitudes and not on objective features'.³⁸⁴ Therefore, precisely because there is no unique and objective system of values we face intractable conflicts of values. We have seen how Plato was afraid that these conflicts entailed cynicism and an attitude according to which everything is questionable, since everything is conventional. In short, on the question of whether we possess morality beyond our social context, the relativist's answer would be strongly negative. The authority of all moral norms, which help people evaluate situations and distinguish between what is right and wrong, is relative to time and place.³⁸⁵ And moral reasoning does not and cannot reach beyond the bounds of whatever our morality is relative to.³⁸⁶

Naturally, in this movement from one extreme, monism or absolutism, to another, relativism, we need to examine whether pluralism can offer a solution which stands in the middle. In addition, it must be made clear in what sense moral pluralism is different from relativism, since the transition from a plural (diverse, fragmented, 'disenchanted') conception of morality to a relativistic one has been a perennial subject of debate in our genealogy. Thus, for Kekes, 'If pluralists are right in rejecting the monistic view that there is one and only one reasonable system of values whose realization would lead to *the* good human life, then they must provide some other ground for regarding some limits as reasonable and some other justification for imposing these limits on possibilities that individuals may legitimately pursue'.³⁸⁷ Hence, according to him, there is a logical peculiarity that informs the argument between pluralism, relativism and monism. 'The stronger the pluralistic case is against one of its opponents', Kekes says, 'the closer pluralism appears to move toward the other [...] For monists may endorse everything pluralists adduce against relativism, and so they may justifiably wonder whether there is anything distinctive left of pluralism. If there is a context-independent standard by which we can evaluate the reasons offered in reaching various moral decisions, then have we not subscribed to just the sort of claim that monists wish to defend?'³⁸⁸

Answering this question from the pluralist perspective is not an easy task, especially because the skepticism on the possibility of an objective morality is nowadays widespread. This skepticism, according to Charles Larmore, is demonstrated

³⁸⁴ John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (1993).

³⁸⁵ Lukes, *Moral Relativism*, 15-16.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁸⁷ Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism*, 14.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

by Jean-François Lyotard, who argued that ‘Once we have seen through the grand modern stories about finding outside history or in the movement of history itself an objective we are left [...] only with our various language games themselves, each with its own rules, but without any impartial standpoint to settle the conflicts between them’.³⁸⁹ This is a strong contextualist and embedded in historical conventions understanding of morality which leads to the relativist’s attitude. However, pluralists argue, the fact that ‘travel broadens the mind’ does not justify this rapid generalization that all moral matters are radically relative.³⁹⁰ In short, we should not confuse *multiculturalism* with relativism. Therefore, the problem for the pluralist is to answer how can we reconcile a conception of objective reasons in resolving moral conflicts with historicity, or, in other words, how ‘can we guide ourselves by the timeless reasons that principles embody if our reason itself is a creature of time?’³⁹¹

As we mentioned above, resolving this contradiction requires a clearer explication of the differences between pluralism and relativism and of the relation of both to monism. Hence, from a pluralist perspective there is something right and something wrong in the relativist’s conception of morality. What is right, Kekes argues, is the criticism of monism or absolutism. What is wrong is the supposition that if absolutism were abandoned, then the philosophical problems that concern us would disappear. Beginning from what is right, the relativist solution to the philosophical problem of conflicting values seems to be (against monism but in line with relativism) a stance of acceptance; i.e. we should accept that moral conflict is natural. Thus,

What reflective agents should do is recognize that the conflicting accounts of [moral] significance derived from different modes of reflection are equally convincing and that neither takes precedence over the other. They should acknowledge that this is so and stop trying to resolve the conflict by reducing one mode of reflection to another. The intellectual agitation produced by the conflict will then be replaced by the peace of mind that comes from understanding that it is in the nature of modes of reflection to conflict in this manner.³⁹²

So, the relativist and the pluralist generally agree upon the conflicting nature of morality. However, for a pluralist, acknowledging that there is a variety of modes of

³⁸⁹ Charles Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (2008), 6.

³⁹⁰ Simon Blackburn, ‘Relativism’ in Hugh LaFollette (ed.), *Ethical Theory*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, Malden and Victoria (2000), 43.

³⁹¹ Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, 11.

³⁹² Kekes, *Pluralism in Philosophy*, 57.

moral reflection, which is irreducible, does not entail, as a relativist would argue, that there is no philosophical problem of moral conflict in the first place. According to the relativist's reasoning, the disruptions of everyday life, which derive from the conflict between different modes of reflection, do not constitute a philosophical problem precisely because they can be resolved by following basic human nature and given conventions as guides.³⁹³ Thus, where relativism goes wrong is the belief that philosophical reflection has nothing to add to the fact that there are and there will always be conflicting sets of values relative to their context. This is where the fundamental difference between pluralism and relativism lies. For, according to the pluralist reasoning, the guides of everyday life, i.e. customs, conventions etc. are sometimes useless. As moral agents we realize that we must go beyond conventions and reflect on the significance of some problems exactly because conventions cannot help us overcome the problems as we understand them. These problems are real, that is they truly disrupt our everyday lives and thus they cannot be ignored. Therefore, real problems become philosophical problems when we start to reflect upon them.³⁹⁴ They become questions that need answers within the specific mode of reflection and about it.

Therefore, although pluralism and relativism generally agree (against monism) that we should adopt a stance of acceptance against the conflicting nature of morality, they strongly disagree in relation to what should be our attitude after this acceptance. The relativist essentially suggests abstention from resolving the problems deriving from moral conflicts, because there should not be any such problems. This view is an expression of the idea that there is no one true body of doctrine in ethics and that what is 'true' for some people is not true for others, so there is no reason to conceive the conflict between different *truths* as a problem that requires resolution. This is why relativism can be seen as a disturbing challenge to monistic explanations of moral authority,³⁹⁵ but, also, this is why relativism cannot be confused with pluralism. For the pluralist would argue that the solution is not to stop reflecting about problems altogether because we should suppose there are none. This would be useless for someone who is already gripped in such a problem. In this view, 'The recommendation of sceptical relativists can be followed only by unreflective people, who do not need it; and it is useless for those who have lost their peace of mind as a result of their reflections'.³⁹⁶

³⁹³ Ibid., 58.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 60, 62.

³⁹⁵ Blackburn, 'Relativism', 38.

³⁹⁶ Kekes, *Pluralism in Philosophy*, 64.

It seems, then, that pluralists partly agree and partly disagree with both monists and relativists. ‘In agreement with monists and in disagreement with relativists’, Kekes argues, ‘pluralists claim that a conception of a good life must be reasonable if it is actually to yield a good life [...] In agreement with relativists and in disagreement with monists, however, pluralists deny that there is a uniquely reasonable conception of a good life embodying something like the one true system of values’.³⁹⁷ It seems, then, that the problem with relativism lies in an unsuccessful attempt to deny that there is a debate on the philosophical implications of the plurality of morality. The relativist move is not a move within the debate, it is a move to close the debate altogether: a conception of a good life cannot be reasonable based on objective reasons and it is pointless to ponder about it. However, this is not helpful when struggling with moral issues at hand, because the problem is the issue itself, not a philosophical theory about the nature of the issue (according to which there is no issue).³⁹⁸ There are radical conflicts in our morality, but the nature of those conflicts is not such as to force us to embrace the relativistic view that all values are ultimately subjective preferences derived from our social context and that we cannot find *good* reasons to lead one life over another.³⁹⁹

Based on these agreements and disagreements between pluralism and relativism we need to return to our main objective; that is, understanding the implications of the conflicting nature of morality for the moral and political agent. Lukes makes a distinction between the internal and external senses of morality. The former is related to the participant’s perspective; the moral agent’s conscious reflection about moral affairs and decisions. The latter is related to the observer’s standpoint. The observer is not a moral agent *per se*; instead he adopts a descriptive view of morality, according to which moral diversity is a *fact*.⁴⁰⁰ Based on this distinction we can compare the pluralist and the relativist attitudes in relation to moral dilemmas. For the pluralist, when faced with a moral dilemma, the moral agent should weigh competing considerations, assess the costs of each moral decision and figure out which are relevant and which have priority. Acknowledging the irreducible conflict between sorts of values, the moral agent should decide upon reflection what is the *right* thing to do. On the other hand, moral relativists will very likely concede that this is indeed the way things look from the inside (the internal sense of morality), but will go on to suggest

³⁹⁷ Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism*, 13-14.

³⁹⁸ Blackburn, *The Big Questions*, 110-111.

³⁹⁹ Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism*, 15.

⁴⁰⁰ Lukes, *Moral Relativism*, 20.

that our judgments are formulated in ways calculated to give moral values an objectivity they do not possess. ‘And they may well add that what looks, from the inside, like reasoned deliberation and reflection aiming at the right answer, exhibits from the outside, different and conflicting styles of reasoning’.⁴⁰¹

Essentially, every argument or decision regarding moral affairs, dilemmas and conflicts is bound to be stopped by the relativist’s remark ‘That is just your opinion’.⁴⁰² Thus, moral relativism seems to reach a similar conclusion to that of moral monism in relation to moral agency; that is, they both severely degrade the importance of making moral choices and developing moral characters through the resolution of moral conflicts. This is either because there are no conflicts (monism) or, even if there are, they should not constitute a field of moral reflection (relativism). Consequently, the relativistic arguments according to which relativism presents itself as the philosophy that best respects difference, and that stands opposed to imperial and colonial attitudes to others cannot withstand the pluralist criticism. ‘The conversation-stopping remark “That is just your opinion” is not only beside the point, but more importantly dehumanizing. It signals that my words do not deserve to be taken seriously, but only taken as symptoms, like signs of a disease’.⁴⁰³ Thus, one example of how relativism goes wrong is in its connection with multiculturalism and the respect and toleration for ‘other’ societies that the latter involves:

What respect for culture, or for other people who accept a culture, can possibly reside in the relativist’s conception of culture as principally a shield against criticism. To view those who accept another culture as so fundamentally “other” that they cannot engage in reasonable moral inquiry is to see them as less than fully human. In short, the notion that subjecting unfamiliar practices to external criticism fails to respect unfamiliar cultures simply will not stand up to careful scrutiny.⁴⁰⁴

In the pluralist argument contextualism does not necessarily entail that the only source of moral norms is social (cultural, economic, political etc.). Following the implications of Aristotle’s philosophy, ‘the contextualist outlook coheres well enough with the general thought that, despite the manifest differences in the ways in which different peoples (and different people) are introduced to morality and participate in it,

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 54-55.

⁴⁰² Blackburn, *The Big Questions*, 111-112.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Michele M. Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (1997), 212, quoted in Lukes, *Moral Relativism*, 118.

there is a common core of morality, which finds expression in a whole variety of different acts in a variety of different contexts'.⁴⁰⁵ This variety does of course set the limits of moral intelligibility. Thus, when we face intractable conflicts and ponder on sorts of ultimate moral commitments which are at odds with the way the world is, 'we cannot entertain revising their authority or suspending judgment'.⁴⁰⁶ The variety and sometimes incommensurability of values is not and should not be an obstacle to practical and moral reasoning. The plurality of values does not necessarily have the destructive implications for the operation of reason⁴⁰⁷ according to the relativist argument. Facing moral dilemmas, then, is the central feature of moral agency in the pluralist perspective, whereas it is a non-issue for both the relativists and monists. Pluralists

[...] should recognize that many philosophical problems have the same general form: a conflict between the incompatible accounts of the significance of facts that follow from different modes of reflection. But they should not assume that their solutions must also have a general form. That assumption is held not only by absolutists but also by relativists. They all believe that *the* solution depends on finding *the* general reason establishing the superiority of one mode of reflection. Relativists give up on rationality and truth because they think that the general reason cannot be found; absolutists think that rationality and truth guarantee that a general reason can be found, even if they have not found it.⁴⁰⁸

In conclusion, moral relativism may be the opposite extreme to monism, but the final attitude toward moral agency is the same: it is derogatory. Either one accepts that moral agency means blindly following a single type of value without reflection (essentially annulling the significance of moral agency) or one accepts that reflection is pointless anyway and it leads nowhere because of its radically contextualist dimension (again, with the same degrading effect on the importance of moral agency). Hence, it seems that pluralism is indeed the best alternative to both, and the middle way between monism and relativism. On the one hand, accepting the diverse and conflicting nature of morality should inform us that moral and political agency cannot simply be a form of applied moral philosophy. This is because the coherency of moral theory (although still useful in setting moral goals and ideals) does not represent the coherency of our moral

⁴⁰⁵ David Wiggins, *Ethics: Twelve Lectures on the Philosophy of Morality*, Penguin Books, London (2006), 347.

⁴⁰⁶ Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1987), 150.

⁴⁰⁷ Peter Lassman, *Pluralism*, Polity Press, Cambridge (2011), 142.

⁴⁰⁸ Kekes, *Pluralism in Philosophy*, 77-78.

universe. On the other hand, pluralism also avoids the worst consequences of relativism. The plurality of values does not entail that there is no space for moral reflection in political matters. From the relativistic perspective politics should not be occupied with irrelevant moral arguments (the classical Thrasymachean response to Plato). Ignoring or avoiding topics and concerns of morality is the cynical *amoral* political attitude. Attempting to resolve those moral problems that ‘disrupt’ our everyday lives is the political attitude that informs and forms moral characters. ‘If a problem is resolved’, Kekes argues, ‘it is defused, but it does not disappear [...] The balance will hold for a while, but the context will change, the conflict will recur, and it will have to be settled again. If a problem is dissolved, it ceases to exist; if it is resolved, it ceases to press. The first solution [monistic and relativistic] is general and reached once and for all; the second [the pluralistic] is temporary’.⁴⁰⁹

E) *Moral conflict: the ‘agent-‘ and ‘outcome-centred’ standpoints and the ‘moral remainder’*

In continuation of the previous argument, the importance of the concept of moral dilemmas for political philosophy becomes obvious when we attempt to understand what the fragmentation of value means in terms of practical solutions. This should have been sufficiently evidenced in the short history of the relationship between politics and ethics and especially in Weber’s political thought. His concerns were revolving around the symbolic deficit of politics due to the fragmentation of value. In general terms, the question is whether moral pluralism should entail a disordered or confounded practical conduct. Thus, after the short parenthesis where we argued that pluralism does not entail abstention from resolving, practically, moral conflicts (like relativists would suggest), we return to the main argument on how pluralism proposes to tackle those conflicts, especially in juxtaposition to monism. As it is already indicated, the difference between pluralistic and monistic theories derives from a different understanding of the relationship between moral theory and moral judgment. Judgment in a monistic conception is *de facto* less important –in moral, not practical terms– because it depends on the correct application of an already given comprehensive system of rules. For the normative ethics of deontology and utilitarianism exercising judgment is a matter of applying the ‘algorithm of life’ into our decision procedure. Such a

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 78.

conception of action-guidance seriously underestimates the importance of moral agency and is, of course, against any conceptions of the ‘moral remainder’.⁴¹⁰

On the contrary, moral judgment in a pluralistic conception is by definition an assessment of action, that is, the practical decision is the mere outcome of a much deeper intellectual and intuitive process in which conflicting values and dilemmatic situations must be reconciled or overcome. Hence, for pluralistic theories, moral judgment cannot be understood simply as the outcome of a practical calculative decision –regardless of the theoretical complexity of the system of values behind this decision. Thus, if Nagel is right to argue that systematic theory succeeds only if we accept a fragmentary approach, the role of judgment in resolving conflicts and applying disparate claims and considerations to real life is indispensable. If we recognize that the legitimate grounds of decision are extremely various and understood to different degrees, then it lies with the moral character to make the best possible decision, knowing that the dilemma is what it is.⁴¹¹ Because our predicament is here so described that, whatever the moral agent does, if he does nothing at all, he does something which he ought not to do, and so can be called upon to justify either his activity or his inactivity.⁴¹² In other words, it is the very essence of being a moral agent that one must necessarily make a decision which is morally both right and wrong. Hampshire thus summarizes the argument of moral pluralism:

We not only find these conflicts in our unreflective intuitions and in common place morality; we may also find, after reflection on the source and nature of our moral intuitions, that these conflicts are unavoidable and not to be softened or glozed over. It seems an unavoidable feature of our moral experience that men should be torn between the moral claims entailed by effectiveness in action, and particularly in politics, and the moral claims derived from the ideals of scrupulous honesty and integrity [...] because morality appears in our experience as a conflict of claims and a division of purpose.⁴¹³

Williams’ ‘moral remainder’, which signifies the agent’s realization and regret that a moral violation must take place, constitutes an important part of such an understanding of moral conflicts. Similarly important in this respect is the concept of moral emotions, which refers to agent-regret or tragic remorse for an unavoidable moral violation. We have analyzed why deontologists and consequentialists reject the idea

⁴¹⁰ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 48, 53-54.

⁴¹¹ Nagel, ‘The Fragmentation of Value’, 182.

⁴¹² Lemmon, ‘Moral Dilemmas’, 108.

⁴¹³ Hampshire, ‘Public and Private Morality’, 43-44.

that moral emotions are irrelevant to moral theory and consequently why they reject the concept of moral dilemmas. Pluralists, on the other hand, find any such reductive program unrealistic: ‘such program cannot do justice to what they take to be manifest diversity of human values and hence inevitably loses or distorts something essential’.⁴¹⁴ Pluralism, therefore, has nothing to lose if supplemented with an account of moral emotions as a way to explicating and clarifying the tensions and paradoxes that derive from moral conflicts. ‘The sense of unease that arises when we feel guilt’, De Wijze says, ‘is not simply a vestige of a primitive moral sensibility or social manipulation but can also serve to focus on crucial evaluative information which is at the basis of the standard moral theories’.⁴¹⁵

The conception of moral dilemmas based on value pluralism and the ‘moral remainder’ acquires a special character when one attempts to translate its importance into the world of politics. The reason behind this is that utilitarianism is especially related to politics because in politics there is no place for the impossibility of action. This poses a paradox for utilitarian theory and a difficulty for pluralist theories. Political realism is strongly affiliated to utilitarianism through the concept of political responsibility, because responsibility by definition presumes that there is a concern for consequences, even if one’s decision is based upon the calculation of those consequences. However, for pluralistic conceptions of political morality, if there is concern then there also is moral conflict. In other words, political responsibility is a concept related to the ‘moral remainder’ and it means that if there were no philosophical or moral doubts for one’s action, then responsibility would be a redundant concept. Thus, the paradox becomes apparent, when one desires to apply utilitarianism into politics as an overall –monistic– philosophical solution. In such a case the concept of responsibility would lose its essence, since the responsible moral agent would not be needed anymore. Responsibility would be exhausted in the correct application of the moral rules and irrespective of the collateral consequences of such application. As Pitkin says, ‘As soon as I know what I will do, no decision remains to be made.’⁴¹⁶ In other words, political realism may not be the appropriate description for political decisions which are based on a pure utilitarian reasoning. In order for an agent to feel responsible he would first have to feel the emotional burden that follows a morally conflicting situation.

⁴¹⁴ Gowans, ‘The Debate on Moral Dilemmas’, 17.

⁴¹⁵ De Wijze, ‘Tragic Remorse’, 458.

⁴¹⁶ Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice*, 323.

As Hampshire and other critics of utilitarianism argue, there is a danger that when this paradox is being neglected we face the ruthless character of politics: ‘The utilitarian habit of mind has brought with it a new abstract cruelty in politics, a dull, destructive political righteousness: mechanical, quantitative thinking, leaden academic minds setting out their moral calculations in leaden abstract prose, and more civilised and more superstitious people destroyed because of enlightened calculations that have proved wrong’.⁴¹⁷ The abandonment of the moral agent in monistic utilitarian approaches reveals a major gap of utilitarian thinking apropos of the relation between politics and morality, because there is no consideration about the peculiar way politics works. Resolving moral conflicts by calculation, even within already firmly established utilitarian rules, presupposes not only the perfectibility of those rules but also the perfectibility of the agents (in terms of calculating consequences) who act under them. These presuppositions are based on an idealistic ontological conception of human nature and they logically result into absolutist practical approaches; far from being realist merely because they calculate utility.

The utilitarian argument underestimates the power of politics as a thick formative ethical concept because it underestimates the concept of moral agency in the way Weber described it. Moral assessment of action is important for the agent who thinks and acts. And this dynamic process is only possible in a world where moral values are innumerable and always changing. If moral conflicts cannot be systematically avoidable and soluble, as pluralists and the argument from the ‘moral remainder’ argue, then the moral character appears always to be undergoing a process of formation; both of himself and of others through the decisions he makes. Moral dilemmas cultivate moral characters and the resolutions made by them cultivate morality in general: ‘It does not seem to have been much observed by ethical philosophers that, speaking psychologically, the adoption of a new morality by an agent is frequently associated with the confrontation of a moral dilemma. Indeed, it is hard to see what else would be likely to bring about a change of moral outlook other than the having to make a difficult moral decision.’⁴¹⁸ This is an Aristotelian argument in its essence.

However, the so called special character of politics raises not only a paradox for monistic theories such as utilitarianism, but also a difficulty for pluralist theories. The moral outlook of the agent seems to be, overall, the outcome of the balance between the ‘agent-centered’ and the ‘outcome-centered’ standpoints, or between the intuitive and

⁴¹⁷ Hampshire, ‘Morality and Pessimism’, 4.

⁴¹⁸ Lemmon, ‘Moral Dilemmas’, 111.

the critical levels of moral thinking. In different spheres of social and private life this balance will necessarily be different. Thus the weighing of consequences is not always rejected by pluralism. Instead it is recognized as an important type of moral thinking, which is especially related to politics. The problem then is how to set the limits on utilitarian reasoning within politics; how it can be checked and controlled by the other equally measured types of moral values. In other words, pluralistic approaches may recognize the problem of conflicting moral values or ethical principles, but there still is a difficulty in offering normative guidance as to what the agents involved should actually do in such political scenarios.

This question takes us back to the fundamental concern that not only Weber but also Plato, Aristotle and Machiavelli had: how do we set the limits on political conduct that commences from equivocal moral grounds? This is where the importance of the moral agent becomes clear, since, as analyzed before, it is judgment that will fill in the gaps of imperfect systematic theory. Deontologists and utilitarians see no moral dilemma and thus the overriding of moral principles becomes a matter of calculation which might end up into a cruel way of moral thinking as Hampshire argued. The moral character instead, sees the dilemma, recognizes the need to override it and is burdened by the ‘moral remainder’ and the responsibility of doing so. Utilitarianism underestimates moral agency because it rejects the morally formative capacity of feeling like that. However, it is this same capacity which will make certain that a political decision is not alienated from the rest of the ‘value orders’ within a society; it is this capacity, pluralists say, that will set the limits to the autonomy of political reasoning and the dangers of utilitarian reductionism.

Attempts by consequentialists to explain away moral conflict as merely incoherence or remnant of primitive moral sensibilities, are not persuasive. Similarly, the careful manoeuvres by deontologists who either evoke ‘the doctrine of double effect’ or insist that given a proper understanding of the hierarchy of values moral conflicts dissolve, are also unconvincing. Both positions fail to engage with the powerful intuition that even when we do what is right in consequentialist or deontological terms, the clash of disparate responsibilities or duties faced by agents results in a moral remainder [...] The existence of real moral conflict, the incommensurability of cherished values, the conflicting personal and role-based moral claims, necessitates that in some situations, moral persons who seek to do the right thing will have their ethical purity violated.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁹ De Wijze, ‘Tragic Remorse’, 457.

Monistic philosophies might implicitly recognize the basic distinction between ‘agent-centered’ and ‘outcome-centered’ standpoints, but they assign absolute moral priority to one of them by means of accepting as definitive or primary only one of the types of moral value included within them. This type of moral value might be categorized under the names of utility, perfectionist ends, absolute rights etc. Pluralism rejects this assignment of primacy to any type of moral values although it recognizes that in different circumstances some type of value might appear more dominant, such as utility in the world of politics. The perennial philosophical and political problem derives from the necessity to limit this domination due to its practical results, i.e. abuse or misuse of power. The only viable non-monistic solution to this problem is to depend on moral judgment. But in order to do this one needs a concept that can explain the paradoxes of political and moral life without denying their existence. Unavoidable wrongdoing is part of our pluralist reality. However, in politics we need some further explication of what this unavoidable wrongdoing is and what it means for the agents involved. This is where the concept of ‘dirty hands’ offers some useful insights, despite the fact that ‘[t]here are different understandings of what constitutes dirty hands where some see it as essentially the ‘means-ends’ problem in politics and others as the clash between public and private moral values.’⁴²⁰

The ‘dirty hands’ problem, as an explication of unavoidable wrongdoing should include all cases of insoluble moral conflicts and conflicts which leave a moral remainder. This means that it will also involve dilemmatic cases which are worse than insoluble conflicts in theory; i.e. cases wherein the agent will find it possible to resolve a moral conflict, but only by un-virtuous action or by death. This kind of resolution implies the tragic tone of the dilemma because the agent is under such a kind of attack that he or she will not emerge unblemished or will not emerge at all. Thus the central question is, if there are tragic dilemmas, can there be such a thing as virtuous agents?⁴²¹ In order to identify such cases the only analytical tool at our disposal is William’s moral remainder. De Wijze argues that the moral sentiment in ‘dirty hands’ situations is peculiar in recognizing that the agent is moved by moral considerations to further the immoral projects of others, destroying thus his or her own moral innocence. In such a case, the moral sentiment is ‘tragic-remorse’⁴²² which signifies the recognition of the moral violation and its morally formative consequences.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 454.

⁴²¹ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 72-73.

⁴²² De Wijze, *Tragic Remorse*, 463-464.

Therefore, the 'dirty hands' concept, along with the moral remainder specified as 'tragic-remorse', provide us with the necessary normative tools to clarifying the perennial problem of moral conflicts and in particular dilemmas of political morality. These concepts accept the complexity of the moral universe and consider the –morally formative– feelings of the agent as a significant part of the solution to this complexity. This is why 'dirty hands' is a problem which can be harmoniously symbiotic with a theory of value pluralism as long as the paradox of moral conflicts instead of being avoided is used to enrich our understanding of morality. However, before we delve into a detailed analysis of the 'dirty hands' concept, it is necessary to narrow down the political problem in relation to morality. The philosophical history of this relationship has shown that there is a peculiar clash of values which undermines the harmony between politics and morality. This clash is the one between private and public moral values.

6. The Central Conflict Between Politics and Morality: The Private and 'Ordinary' vs. the Public and Political

A) *Notions of the public, the private and the political: overcoming the conceptual confusion*

We have seen how the plurality of moral principles, in combination with the complexity of human affairs, renders impossible the systematization of morality (by means of assigning absolute priority to a specific type of moral values over others). Monistic explanations of morality would suggest that this systematization is theoretically possible if we are ready to accept critically that one type of values is agreed to be overarching when facing moral conflicts. In modern times these explanations are typically based on either deontic or utilitarian approaches to morality. Theorists of value pluralism, on the other hand, would respond that neither theoretically nor practically is it possible to achieve such a thing, because it would lead to an arbitrary understanding of morality and thus to a reductionist kind of both moral and political conduct. The pluralistic argument, however, creates some further problems. It leads to inevitable moral impasses because different types of equally valued moral principles will conflict in different spheres of life. This difficulty is the necessary outcome of a particular situation in which the moral agent has to choose which of the equivalent –in every respect– moral principles should be applied and which should be unjustifiably overridden or outweighed, considering the moral and practical cost of the choice. According to Nagel's terminology, the basic –irreducible– dichotomy of moral values between the 'agent-centred' and the 'outcome-centred' moral standpoints will always require a kind of moral compromise by the agent who faces a moral dilemma.

These two distinguished, but also interrelated, standpoints constitute the ground of the arguments according to which the tension between politics and morality is complex, conflicting, and thus of great interest.⁴²³ As we have illustrated in the short history of politics and ethics, there is a central theme (though not the only one) which has perennially determined their relationship. This central theme is a conflict; a conflict between private-personal, public, and political moral imperatives, with private

⁴²³ C. A. J. Coady, *Messy Morality: The Challenge of Politics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford (2008), 9.

imperatives being mainly concerned with the ‘agent-centred’ standpoint and public and political imperatives being permeated by ‘outcome-centred’ biased principles. It is necessary therefore to clarify the difference between the concepts of the public, the political and the private. A preliminary analysis would define public morality as not identical with political morality despite the fact that they are, obviously, strongly related. On the other hand, public and political moral principles are both fundamentally distinguished from private moral principles because public and political positions cannot be isolated positions. Instead they are constituted in the first place in order to promote the social interest –however this may be defined– and to set the rules for general social conduct. Private morality is in turn identified with an agent’s own ethical preconceptions, which, even if strongly affected by their social context, are understood as an agent’s own reflection of his personality, separate from the ‘life orders’ within and by which is otherwise defined.

The conventional view of public morality poses itself in juxtaposition to personal morality with regard to their difference in origin, function and content. Schematically, they differ in origin because personal morality refers to relations, or non-relations, between individuals, whereas public morality refers to institutional circumstances. They differ in function because the end of personal morality is morally the moral ‘progression’ of individuals, whereas public morality is preoccupied with the ethical achievements of individuals only in their institutional roles and with the moral characteristics of politics in a particular community. Finally, they differ in content due to the complex circumstances that moral agents find themselves in when they are politically active.⁴²⁴ Therefore, it seems easier to define the limits that separate a private sphere of ethical conduct from the public and political ‘orders of life’. It is time to recall Bosanquet’s argument that those two fundamental spheres of moral values derive from the basic distinction between ‘acts that are essentially private and acts essentially public.’

To steal or murder, to lie, or to commit personal immorality, for instance, as we said cannot be a public act. Such acts cannot embody a general interest willed by the public will.⁴²⁵

⁴²⁴ Dennis F. Thompson, *Restoring Responsibility*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (2005), 227-228.

⁴²⁵ Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory*, 325.

Bosanquet's argument is revealing of the moral significance that authors have perennially attributed to the distinction between private and public actions. However, the distinction between the public and the political is not so clear; instead the concepts are often confused and as a result the moral grounds of public and political action are obscured. From a modern perspective the public sphere could be assumed to incorporate the political since the meaning of the term refers to all the positions in relation to promoting the general interests of society, whereas the political refers only to a specific set of organizing, or executive, positions within the public. Therefore, it is not unusual when discussing about the tension between public and private morality to imply or take as given the inclusion of the political in the relationship. Thus instead of three different sets of values we only have two and this creates some conceptual difficulties. The reason why the concept of the public tends to have a wider logical bearing than the political may lie in the fact that in the modern perspective politics has become a narrower field of conduct dominated by the ascendancy of technocratic policies in every sphere of public life. In Weber's terminology, we could say that bureaucracy, based on the ever-increasing importance of economics, has absorbed and completely dominated politics. Thus, nowadays, in a continually diminishing political attitude, the public sphere of conduct is conceived to incorporate a range of important connections with notions of social, communal and international policies, whereas politics is the vocation of the technocrats who organize these policies.

Nevertheless, we should not be ready to accept the disappearance of politics in a classical sense both for theoretical and practical or ethical reasons. Following Weber's theory of politics, both the public and political spheres are guided by 'outcome-centred' principles which have, however, a different focal point and intensity. As already mentioned public officials are mainly concerned with applying rules of impartiality, whereas politicians usually have to calculate the consequences of a policy in terms of overall utility. However, the principle of utility strongly discloses the conflict of 'agent-centred' against 'outcome-centred' types of values, because its application presupposes overriding all other moral concerns. Thus, politicians must confront and transcend the conflicting values of a variety of 'life orders'. In terms of collective life the wise application of utilitarian or, according to Hare, critical thinking is crucial for the promotion of social integration. This is where Weber's argument in favour of nationalistic politics was grounded upon: the political virtue to create a substantive symbolic reference for the collectivity. Calculating consequences is an essential –not

overriding— feature of such a conception of virtue, but not in a reduced to efficiency economic sense.

On the other hand, the meaning of impartiality in the public sphere –although this is ultimately and on the whole concerned with social consequences– is that of an objective realization of the political executive decisions –and in ethical terms more formative and thus higher decisions. Objectivity and impartiality in public life are necessary, both in order to cultivate a sense of respect for conflicting sets of values (supplementing thus politics in their quest for social integration) and to grow a culture of scientific efficiency when managing the affairs of the state. From this point of view, the political, and not the public, is of primary concern in relation to the problem of moral conflicts. Politics re-organizes values and dictates their newly conceived application. Also, the inescapable utilitarian reasoning behind this re-organization of values generates moral and practical dilemmas. These will also have to be resolved by politics itself. Following the Weberian line of reasoning, the politicians’ purpose is to re-define the problematic relationship between private, public and political morality (and between the different ‘life orders’ in general), whereas the public officials’ role is usually limited to executing political decisions.

Therefore, the assumption that the political is only an element within the wider public sphere may be explained by the modern narrow and procedural understanding of politics. The reason for this can be found in the ascendancy of the state upon which public and political life are concentrated. However, politics never ceases being the defining point of social moral conduct, including general public practices. This is why a conception of politics reduced to *amoral* calculation of power relations creates more problems than its apparently realistic approach was meant to resolve. Plato and Aristotle struggled with the idea that politics should not be connected with a deeply philosophical and ontological conception of social life. In antiquity there was no separation between the political and the public. The debate always had to be between one’s political conduct and one’s ethical purposes. The end was to reconcile collective aims with private pursuits under a unitary conception of the good life. Similarly, Machiavelli and Weber, despite their acknowledgement of the fragmentation of values and of the variety of spheres of conduct, conceived politics as a fundamentally ethical ‘order of action’, which in some sense overrides or should override all orders. This moral primacy of politics is due to its peculiar characteristics and effects on other peoples’ lives. And we have analyzed that this conception of politics was not in Machiavelli and Weber’s case based upon a teleological explanation of human life, but

upon the ‘ancient’ concern that politics without ethical substance, even in an ethically fragmented world, can be the most dangerous human invention.

Notwithstanding the question of ethical superiority between the concept of the political and the concept of the public, these can and often are in conflict with each other. According to Arthur Applbaum unless there is a widespread agreement between elected politicians and public officials (as civil servants) about the correct specification or execution of public morality, this kind of conflict will not be rare.⁴²⁶ In particular, as mentioned above, public morality mainly refers to official positions, the character of which is based in promoting impartial policies, whereas political positions should usually be biased toward morally consequential demands (i.e. with regard to political effectiveness or the ability to preserve the power which comes from the political position), which might undermine impartial rules that are more ‘agent-centred’ biased. In general though, ‘the role of the public official is intimately connected to a political morality outside the role, from where it draws its substantive justification, its legitimate authority to command, and its force of obligation’.⁴²⁷

B) The fundamental moral conflict: private vs. public and political morality

The clarification of the distinction between the public and the political is necessary because the argument made in this thesis essentially suggests that the tension between politics and ethics derives from the perennial conflict between the private and the political. Hence, the concepts of public and political morality may be both distinguished from private morality, because the central reasons for this distinction are mainly of the same character; that is, the types of values that are dominant in the private sphere may conflict with the types of values that guide the other two spheres. What it would be still useful to analyze further is the manner in which this tension is created and why the necessity to use utility as an overriding principle aggravates the conflict of values in politics. This reveals the peculiar position of the moral character that has to make politically compromising decisions, which entail great moral costs and thus urge for a re-evaluation of the meaning of moral integrity.

The basic idea is summarized in the Socratic maxim, according to which politics makes adherence to private moral principles extremely difficult, if not impossible.

⁴²⁶ Arthur Isak Applbaum, *Ethics for Adversaries: The Morality of Roles in Public and Professional Life*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (1999), 69.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 69.

Plato maintains that politics requires deceit even in a morally ideal society; Aristotle argues that rulers will usually promote their own interests instead of the interests of the community; Machiavelli suggests that politics or politicians may seem to be morally worse, or that they act morally ambiguously in comparison to the rest of us. Weber corroborates the view that the political vocation is a normative matrix for personal tragic situations. All of them agree that politicians are considered to be morally worse when they act in order to secure their own interests instead of the community's interests and, at best, morally ambiguous when they try to advance desirable social and political ends by morally disputable acts.⁴²⁸

The first case seems to be theoretically easier and it corresponds to cases of corruption, in which politicians and public officials do not fulfil the role's predetermined moral rules, while instead they try to gain personal benefits. In modern democratic regimes where the people and the politicians share responsibility for the moral rules of social conduct there is a shift toward the problem of corruption, which is easier to identify, and is more often disclosed in general public practices than in political decisions. This is only natural because the violation of rules of impartiality for one's own interest is a clear case of corruption against the standards set by society (by both public officials and politicians). On the contrary, reconciling morally conflicting values by compromise, in order to promote the general interest of a society which sometimes consents and shares responsibility for this compromise, constitutes a different level of political and moral discourse altogether. In her own discussion of politics and morality Susan Mendus commences her analysis from the study of different approaches to morality (such as consequentialism versus deontology) and then by understanding concepts such as integrity, moral virtues, value pluralism and the moral demands of social roles within those philosophical traditions.⁴²⁹ Her intention is to understand the case of moral conflicts within the context we analyzed in the previous chapter.

The case of moral conflicts powerfully brings to the forth the tension between private and political morality. How do we reconcile what is politically necessary with what is morally forbidden outside politics and who should be responsible for this reconciliation? Machiavelli and Weber have set the context of the problem and have given the limited options for its solution: we can either separate politics from morality

⁴²⁸ Susan Mendus, *Politics and Morality*, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden (2009), 14-15.

⁴²⁹ Stephen de Wijze, 'The Challenge of a Moral Politics: Mendus and Coady on Politics, Integrity and "Dirty Hands"', *Res Publica*, 18 (2012), 190.

altogether and conceive politics as an autonomous ethical sphere with its own rules of conduct; or, oppositely, we can consider morality as overriding all political matters and offer a monistic explanation of social action. Finally we can search for their common place and use them as supplementing each other. The answer, as the short history of politics and ethics has illustrated, depends on specific understandings of ethics which in turn lead to specific political attitudes. In other words, behind every political decision there is an ontological and epistemological conception of ethics; an existential exegesis regarding the purposes of humanity.

What we know for certain is that the moral and political agent, whether starting from a monistic explanation of moral ends or from a pluralistic perspective, will have to reflect seriously on this interrelation between politics and ethics. Sophocles conceived the problem eloquently when he said that ‘nothing tests moral character better than “the practice of authority and rule”’.⁴³⁰ According to Reinhold Niebuhr’s vivid description, the most important problems of political philosophy reveal a constant and irreconcilable conflict between the needs of society and the imperatives of a sensitive conscience. ‘This conflict or tension, between politics and morality is made inevitable by the double focus of the moral life: one focus is on the inner life of the individual, and the other on the necessities of man’s social life. These two moral perspectives are not mutually exclusive and the contradiction between them is not absolute. But neither are they easily harmonised.’⁴³¹

We have argued that the distinction between political and private morality constitutes a parallel to the conflict between the ‘agent-centred’ and the ‘outcome-centred’ perspectives. The way someone understands the interrelation and inter-determination of those perspectives sets the philosophical basis for a specific understanding of the relationship between politics and ethics in general. In William’s words, the problem of politics and morality starts from the more specific question of ‘What sorts of persons do we want and need to be politicians?’ which is then followed by the broader question of ‘what we morally want from politics?’.⁴³² This could in turn be followed by the even more general problem of how we should conceive ethics in the first place. These three questions illustrate the predicament of the moral character that will face certain practical and theoretical difficulties and will have to reconcile conflicting moral values when engaged in politics.

⁴³⁰ Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, in the preface.

⁴³¹ Niebuhr, Reinhold, *Moral Man And Immoral Society*, Continuum, London and New York (2005), 169.

⁴³² Bernard Williams, ‘Politics and Moral Character’, in Hampshire (ed.), *Public and Private Morality*, 55.

Socrates' case may again be helpful in this respect. His understanding of morality contains a strong intellectual element despite the fact that he was very much aware of the dilemmas generated by political morality.⁴³³ Socrates spent his entire life theorizing upon the tension between private and political virtue and in many cases he chose to give priority to the values of contemplative life over the values of political life. His choice has all the more importance exactly because he well understood the meaning of political imperatives. It was impossible not to do so in an age and a place where the individual was always considered to be inferior to the *polis*. This raises the important questions about where private morality and political morality meet each other; how we set the priority –if there is any– between them; and, following the argument from the moral remainder, what is the importance and integrity of the agent in doing so.

C) From private 'ordinary' morality to political conduct: the discontinuities which constitute the philosophical problem

The main argument for the priority of political morality over private morality is based upon the consequentialist notion that in political life actions are not just of significance for the agent who performs them,⁴³⁴ and thus they cannot rely on a prior private moral set of guidelines. This means that politics has to be separated from other more general and ordinary moral considerations. Thus private morality is identified with the rest of the 'life orders' and acquires the meaning of the 'ordinary' against the 'extraordinary' of political ethics. On the other hand, there is the view which presupposes a conception of private morality as something overarching with intrinsic, universal and absolute value. From this standpoint moral actions are not performed for the sake of advantage but for their inherent value, independently of large scale consequences. In this sense nothing can override basic or 'ordinary' moral principles because morality is itself overriding,⁴³⁵ and it establishes the set of values that should externally predetermine political action. In both cases, as we have previously explained, assigning overriding priority to a set of values might be supported by a monistic philosophical attitude, either guided by utilitarianism in case of politics or by deontic theories in case of absolute principles.

⁴³³ Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 18.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 7.

There is a tendency to identify the tradition of political realism with the moral attitude which is based upon the calculation of consequences (which in the end, regarding politics, will include some kind of utilitarianism) and to oppose this tradition against those who conceive general moral principles as inviolable independently of the circumstances. In politics this tradition might be referred to as political idealism. Johnson summarizes the main arguments of the latter tradition which conceives the moral as prior to the political:

Those who claim that moral considerations have a bearing on politics have often seen morality as a way of establishing the boundaries of politics [...] Thus, acts which are regarded as permissible and desirable in politics are regarded as impermissible and undesirable by morality [...] It is from morality that we derive the sustenance to condemn acts such as deceit, corruption, cruelty, torture, and exploitation [...] In morality the emphasis is on human autonomy, equality of respect and consideration and, as applied to politics, the primary virtues of justice and fairness.⁴³⁶

Political realists, on the other hand, warn us against bringing irrelevant moral principles to bear upon political questions. They insist that political morality is not the same as private morality and may often contradict it. Two basic features of this argument refer firstly to the distinction between normal political situations, in which political agents can act in ways that converge toward private morality, and extreme situations that require other forms of conduct (the classical Machiavellian argument); and secondly to the contention that the basic point and structure of politics creates a qualitatively different set of challenges to which private morality offers an inadequate guide.⁴³⁷

Political realism argues that there is an autonomous political sphere of ethics simply because ordinary moral dispositions would not work (in terms of efficiency or consequences) within politics. It is necessary, then, to make clear whether the autonomy of political morality is based upon the notion that the utility principle is overriding in general, or that it only has to be given priority in political matters, but not outside politics. In the first case, political realism might be an expression of philosophical monism which, as we have seen, reduces politics to technical calculations. In the second case, we might have a mild form of political realism which does not assign absolute priority to political demands of utility, but it does recognize an irreducible plurality of values and the need for compromise between the demands of

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 68.

⁴³⁷ William Galston, 'Realism in political theory', *European Journal of Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (October 2010), 392.

politics and those of private or ‘ordinary’ morality. Political idealism, on the contrary, starting from deontic absolute principles cannot leave any margin for consequentialist justifications in political conduct because any kind of utilitarian reasoning would annul the essence of the overriding morality itself.

We have seen this debate previously, within the wider context of moral dilemmas and argued that absolute deontic theories and all-inclusive utilitarianism may prioritize moral principles in a fundamentally different way, but for both traditions there can be no moral conflicts. From both perspectives, the relationship between politics and morality appears over-simplistic.

What can I say to critics, such as Anscombe, Hare, Kant, amongst others, who argue that there is no need for the distinction between a political and a personal ethic? Utilitarianism, for example, which is a sophisticated and subtle moral doctrine, could provide the appropriate limits to moral behaviour without making a distinction between a personal and political morality [...] A Kantian (or for that matter any other deontological personal moral theory) fares no better. Here too the generic demands of a personal morality conflict with the ethical requirements of political office.⁴³⁸

Moral absolutism (or moralism)⁴³⁹ condemns some political actions as essentially opposed to its predetermined imperatives and for this reason might ask for two things: first, the replacement of morally unworthy politicians by individuals who have proved to be morally impeccable. Second, if the first process is impossible, and since we have recognized that politicians will necessarily face moral reasons that are external to their role (the absolute imperatives of private morality), they should withdraw from political life and keep their moral integrities unblemished. On the other hand, utilitarianism faces all moral conflicts with the same attitude: if everything else fails utility is the moral principle that will resolve all moral conflicts; the same goes for politics. Ordinary moral intuitions, in this case, are an obstacle, or at best irrelevant if they do not support the ‘outcome-centred’ solution in all moral conflicts. In conclusion, in both respects morality determines the understanding and the conduct of politics. The difference is that utilitarian theories cultivate pretences of political realism, while, as analyzed in the previous chapter, realism based on a form of utilitarianism is a moral paradox.

⁴³⁸ De Wijze, ‘Towards a Political Ethic’, 200-201.

⁴³⁹ Coady, *Messy Morality*, 14.

This is why the relationship between politics and morality has been considered such a moral conundrum; because monistic explanations over-simplify a problem that is by its very nature highly complex. On the one hand, there is an explanation that conceives politics as an undermining element against the purity of morality. On the other, there is an explanation that conceives the purity of morality as an undermining element against sheer effectiveness in politics. Both explanations fail to understand how moral values interact in order to integrate politics with morality, but also in order to create tension between them. Moral discourse and political success should be measured and judged as interrelated elements, not as mutually exclusive or irrelevant. This approach presupposes a pluralist understanding of morality and a baseless ontological conception of human beings. This is nevertheless in a difficult position to hold, specifically against utilitarian arguments, exactly because political morality is *ipso facto* dominated by the overriding ‘outcome-centred’ principles of conduct: in politics we need practical results, not theoretical discourse.

This means that the problem of political morality is both complex and intractable. Immoral acts are performed for political ends not only by political gangsters but by individuals whom we might otherwise describe as morally admirable. Sometimes the good have to behave badly or at least less than well if effective political action is to take place. The gap between morality and politics is not simply between those who are predisposed to act well and those who are not. This may prompt withdrawal to a life of private virtue.⁴⁴⁰

According to the pluralistic argument, the relationship between private and political morality perfectly illustrates the conflict of moral values within and between the different ‘life orders’. Thus, the political agent is the issue which must draw our attention if we wish to acquire a better understanding of moral dilemmas in political life. This is firstly because there are no standard solutions for dilemmatic situations, given the pluralist approach, and secondly because politics demands practical results. Thus, moral and political agency re-acquires its normative significance based on the pluralist assumption that moral wisdom, or virtue, is necessary in order to perceive a possible moral dilemma.⁴⁴¹ The genuinely virtuous agents do not therefore easily say ‘nothing else is open to me’ because virtue is exactly this ability to understanding the

⁴⁴⁰ Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 69.

⁴⁴¹ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 78.

complex nature of morality and correspondingly acting in non-absolute or non-reductionist ways.⁴⁴²

According to Philp's account of political conduct, political virtues should be distinguished from moral virtues. Thus, a true realistic approach of politics would accept that, what each particular politician can and should do, will vary. 'That is, that it is not possible to move directly from the prescriptions of ideal theory to an account of what, in any particular case, should be done.'⁴⁴³ This argument from political realism is in accord with the pluralist view of morality in both its interpretation of morality and its inability to propose specific solutions (because there might not be any) for conflicting situations. Aristotle suggested that practical wisdom is the result of combining philosophical knowledge of general principles of morality with a well-cultivated ability to apply this knowledge into particular situations, especially when these principles might be conflicting; and even then the outcome is not guaranteed. The transition from 'ordinary' morality to particular political decisions, especially when we know that the transition itself might entail a violation of 'ordinary' morality, is the crucial point for political philosophy. How are we to set the limits on the interaction between the private and political moral standpoints, while being in danger to end up either with an isolated and absolute utilitarian political ethics or with politics of moralism where efficiency is condemned as in principle immoral?

Political arguments should make clear whether they accept that the utility principle is overriding in general, or only within politics; in the first case, we have a monistic explanation of morality and all political solutions are predetermined; in the second case, there is an acceptance of the plurality of different types of values in different spheres of life, and a recognition of the inevitable moral tensions that will arise when these spheres are intertwined –and ordinary life is always intertwined with politics. Here, an explanation of how utilitarian reasoning is to be limited –so as to avoid ending up with the dangerous 'the ends justify the means' i.e. the cruel face of politics– is needed. This explanation requires a thorough analysis of the ways politics and morality are related, aiming at the moral character that will be qualified to strike a balance between them and efficiently limit the peculiar moral demands of both of them.

The borderline, therefore, between politics and morality is defined by the relationship between the moral agent and the political or public role. This relationship

⁴⁴² Ibid., 86-87.

⁴⁴³ Mark Philp, 'What is to be done? Political theory and political realism', *European Journal of Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (October 2010), 467.

should be interactive. Political and public roles carry with them certain duties to be fulfilled. This fact gives rise to multiple problems which derive from the pluralist nature of morality itself: first, there is the potential conflict between the ‘agent-centred’ values against the duties derived from public roles; second, the same kind of values will be against the duties derived from the qualitatively different political roles; and third, there is the potential conflict between the duties derived from public roles against those derived from political roles. Therefore, exactly because of the conflicting nature of moral values in different spheres of life, the political agents should have a certain ability in order to fulfil the corresponding roles and successfully face their conflicting demands. This ability is what we call political or public virtue and does not require a rejection of ‘ordinary’ morality, but a deep understanding of it and a readiness for difficult moral compromises.

D) *The conflicting nature of morality: impartiality against integrity*

So far we have seen how the more general subject of moral conflicts is related to the problematic relationship between politics and morality and how the moral disposition of the agents is involved in this relationship. Monistic theories should have a standard solution for every moral conflict which might be the outcome of engagement in politics. Idealistic prescriptions, which are based on deontic theories and make for absolute attitudes, would either reject or severely compromise the efficiency of politics, disregarding thus large-scale consequences and the meaning of politics itself.

Opposed to a goal seeking argument, an absolute judgement of value involves the recognition of the purity of goodness –that an act is performed not for the sake of advantage or the avoidance of pain, or even out of duty. The value of such an act is intrinsic and does not allow evaluation or comparison. Understanding actions and judgements as having an absolute ethical significance means rejecting reductionist accounts of morality.⁴⁴⁴

Consequentialist accounts which are based on utilitarian reasoning, on the other hand, would reduce all moral problems to utility as the overriding moral principle, neglecting the importance of moral values as such for the moral agents themselves. This moral basis for political conduct has been proved to be neither successful nor morally justified. All monistic explanations underestimate the importance of the moral

⁴⁴⁴ Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 102-103.

agents when fulfilling their social roles because it is only demanded from them to follow a very specific and assumingly impeccable set of moral principles. The only things they might face are cases of corruption, but never morally dilemmatic situations, limiting, thus, the significance of the concept of responsibility into being responsible for their imperfect human nature. Pluralistic accounts, on the contrary, accept that the distinction between private and political moral principles belongs to a wider distinction between different set of values which are of equivalent importance, interrelated but irreducible to each other. That necessarily entails a level of autonomy for political moral considerations. This in turn means that there is also the difficult task of connecting politics with 'ordinary' morality, or else of compromising the seemingly uncompromised.

Utilitarianism and idealism would simplify the problem by focusing, respectively, on how to achieve political outcomes regardless of moral costs for the agents involved, and on how to achieve the salvation of moral integrities regardless of practical costs for the collectivity. They both underestimate the importance of the mediating agent's moral decisions; the political figure who personifies the conflict between political, public and private morality and understands and endures the moral predicament, notwithstanding the absence of a philosophical solution. It is this outcome from the union of the political role with the moral character which best represents the seriousness of the problem and reveals the insufficiency of monistic explanations of morality. As we have already mentioned, the existence of widespread lying and deception in politics is not, in itself, enough to justify the conclusion that there is a conflict between morality and politics, or that politicians are morally worse than us. This latter view is an over-simplification, and one reason for this is that, when politicians lie, it may not be in order to further their own ends; it may be in order to secure important and desirable political ends.⁴⁴⁵ 'In order to do the right thing, one has to do the wrong thing; in order to be or do good, one must also be or do evil'.⁴⁴⁶ On the other hand, doing the wrong thing in order to do good does not wipe out the moral wrongness of the action. This is the kind of moral dilemma politicians usually have to face and this is why the problem of the moral character is so pressing. How a political figure is going to respond to a moral conflict and what would be the outcome of this response depends on their moral disposition and their understanding of ethics.

⁴⁴⁵ Mendus, *Politics and Morality*, 15.

⁴⁴⁶ Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics*, 1-2.

In the face of such moral dilemmas, politicians themselves may feel both that they have sacrificed their integrities and that it is politics that has demanded that sacrifice of them. Alternatively, politicians may act as there is no moral dilemma at all, either because they do not accept the peculiar moral demands of politics (a case of moral absolutism), or because they believe moral integrity is irrelevant (a case of unlimited utilitarianism). In this latter case political morality is overridden by general overarching moral principles. But in the first case, where the loss of integrity is considered to be the result of the peculiar demands of politics, political morality should claim an autonomous realm of existence and one serious problem is the extent of this autonomy. Mendus argues that in order to establish whether this is something desirable or not, we have to understand in what ways politics undermines integrity.⁴⁴⁷ In addition, we have to understand what is the role of integrity amidst the conflict between private and political or public morality, given the argument, that ‘the basic point and structure of politics creates a qualitatively different set of challenges to which individual morality offers an inadequate guide.’

However, before we concentrate on the question of ‘what we morally want from our politicians?’ we should still insist on the general understanding of morality and of moral conflicts in relation to moral integrity. It will not be difficult to set some basic features of the latter concept based on the views of the ‘classical’ thinkers mentioned above. To begin with, integrity should not be considered as equal to moral goodness or perfectibility. There are people who may exhibit consistent integrity in their action, but may nevertheless be morally bad. In this sense, integrity differs from moral innocence because integrity is realized in action whereas innocence is irreconcilable with human action.⁴⁴⁸ To have moral integrity is not to follow blindly a series of moral guidelines. Thus, it is a misconception to argue that the attempt to maintain one’s moral integrity can only be achieved by morally monistic attitudes. Integrity is a moral disposition which is going to be realized in social life where the conflict of different sets of moral values is most evident, making thus absolute moral attitudes very difficult to be sustained.

Williams defines integrity as ‘a matter of standing by what one believes to be ethically necessary.’ According to Mendus’ analysis on this approach the word ‘ethically’ is important because it points to a distinction between different kinds of value; the distinction which constitutes the basis for the more general conflict between

⁴⁴⁷ Mendus, *Politics and Morality*, 16.

⁴⁴⁸ Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 14.

private and public or political morality. This distinction, as we have analyzed, suggests that there may not be simply one distinctively moral value, but different kinds of broadly ethical values, some of which reflect the values of society and are associated with social or conventional morality and some of which reflect the values of personal integrity.⁴⁴⁹

Mendus' aim is to understand how the tension between different sets of values translates into ethically dilemmatic political situations. According to her, this understanding requires an analysis of the challenges of value pluralism and the all important context within which the politician's role and duties must be evaluated.⁴⁵⁰ Therefore, the concept of integrity may incorporate both sets of those conflicting ethical values and this is how it introduces us to the conflict between private and political morality. We can recall here Niebuhr's description according to which the 'conflict or tension, between politics and morality is made inevitable by the double focus of the moral life: one focus is on the inner life of the individual, and the other on the necessities of man's social life. These two moral perspectives are not mutually exclusive and the contradiction between them is not absolute. But neither are they easily harmonised.'⁴⁵¹ The perspective of the personal life of the individual reflects private moral integrity and the perspective of the necessities of man's social life reflects the rules that work as the grounds of public and political morality.

Following the same line of reasoning, and Mendus' analysis of William's definition of integrity, we may claim that integrity, understood as sticking by what one believes to be ethically necessary and refusing to engage in evil, is in conflict with morality understood as taking account of the consequences of our actions and of our responsibilities to them:

It may seem that in this case the tension between integrity and morality is created by adopting a conception of morality that places great weight on consequences, but in fact the problem is wider than that and is generated not merely by consequentialist understandings of morality, but by impartialist understandings of morality – that is to say, by conceptions of morality that insist on the importance of treating all equally or of showing equal respect for everyone. This tension is not an accident. Impartialist morality, whether consequentialist or not, is a very important way of restricting a person's ability to act on his or her personal commitments [integrity], or on what he or she believes to be ethically necessary, so the tension between integrity (understood as a matter of sticking by what one

⁴⁴⁹ Mendus, *Politics and Morality* 28.

⁴⁵⁰ De Wijze, 'The Challenge of a Moral Politics', 190.

⁴⁵¹ Niebuhr, *Moral Man And Immoral Society*, 169.

believes to be ethically necessary) and morality (understood as acting impartially towards all who are affected by one's actions) is both predictable and unavoidable [...]⁴⁵²

As De Wijze argues, for Mendus the tension between integrity and impartial morality arises because the former demands that we act on our own cherished commitments, while the latter properly constrains our actions in the world so that we do not harm or treat others with disrespect. So there is always the potential for integrity and morality to conflict. But it is in the domain of politics that this problem becomes frequent and far more acute.⁴⁵³ This is an explanation regarding how public morality can be threatening to private morality, despite the fact that impartial moral principles can be generally derived from both the 'agent-centred' and the 'outcome-centred' moral perspectives. Lynn McFall offers another helpful view of the above tension that eventually produces the distinction between private and public morality: 'Say that a personal morality is that set of moral principles or commitments that I adhere to that I do not expect everyone to adhere to and that need not be characterized by impartiality. A social morality is the set of principles that we adhere to that we expect everyone to adhere to and that are characterized by impartiality. The difference between them is clearly seen in a case of conflict.'⁴⁵⁴

Morality (impartial morality) then, is at odds with integrity (partial morality) and, at least in principle, has a tendency to undermine it. This argument is corresponding to the conflict between the 'agent-centred' against the 'outcome-centred' moral values which are both constitutive of our moral dispositions. McFall's example of a case in which a captain of a sinking ship is called to save the people from drowning and has time to save either two complete strangers or her relatives illustrates this tendency clearly. She says:

Suppose, in my role as ship captain, that I am charged to take the safety of everyone equally into account. This would be true for anyone in my position, so the principle, "Guard the safety of all passengers equally" is both universal and impartial. Now suppose I see that my husband and two other passengers are drowning. My husband weighs what the two others weigh put together. He is drowning on starboard, they are drowning at port. If I save my husband, the two will drown, and vice versa. As a wife I should save my husband; as

⁴⁵² Mendus, *Politics and Morality*, 29.

⁴⁵³ De Wijze, 'The Challenge of a Moral Politics', 191.

⁴⁵⁴ McFall, 'Integrity', 14.

ship captain I should save the two strangers. The demands of personal morality conflict with those of social morality. What does moral integrity require?⁴⁵⁵

According to William's definition of integrity the answer should be based upon one's most fundamental ethical commitments: when those commitments give priority to the demands of impartial morality then they should not decide to make the choice according to their personal standpoint and they should save the strangers first. Instead, when the commitments of the personal standpoint are stronger and lie, for example, with one's values of the family, then to abandon them would constitute a serious loss of integrity. The agent's moral disposition is a decisive factor with regards to how we achieve a moral and practical outcome notwithstanding already prescribed rules of conduct in specific social spheres. Is there a conclusion then? McFall writes:

What makes such conflicts possible? For most of us, both relations of personal affection and social moral commitments have great if not identity-conferring importance. If they did not, we would recognize no dilemma. A general argument either way -for the claims of social or personal morality at the expense of the other-would do violence to our intuitions. If we were to grant supreme importance to social morality, we could honor no personal moral commitments. (Can a utilitarian have friends? Yes, but not of his own). And conversely. A dilemma, by definition, presupposes a commitment to both sides [...] My own view is this. Whatever choice I make (further extraordinary complications excluded), I would not be morally blameworthy. (Praise we save for those who would do as we do or better.) If I save the two strangers, I am right from the social-moral point of view; if I save my husband, I am right from the personal-moral point of view. And whatever choice I make I am wrong from some point of view. Since both are moral requirements of comparable importance, I am free to choose, based on commitments particular to myself, what I could or could not "live with" (or without).⁴⁵⁶

This is in confirmation of the pluralistic logic. In theory, and even more in cases of everyday life, the dilemma of choosing between personal integrity and impartial morality is insoluble; not only because it is not perceived as such by individuals who have not cultivated their critical level of thinking, and thus are unable to think clearly and make the necessary calculations (as Hare would like us to think), but mainly because some basic moral values conflict and are irreducible to each other. Eventually, it comes down to how the moral character is constituted in the first place, given the fact that there will always be a degree of discontinuity between different sets of moral

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 17-18.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 19.

intuitions. In other words, ordinary persons, when they face a moral dilemma, cannot philosophically make the distinction between moral integrity and impartial morality, but can only act according to their moral disposition, or, according to Hare, follow their inculcated moral intuitions. And this would mean that their fundamental ethical commitments would always determine their action whether they are conducting their social roles or their private lives' plans. The importance of this point cannot be over-emphasized, because it essentially proposes that in cases of moral dilemmas and practical predicaments the moral disposition of the political agent might be far more significant than any prior role-related moral rules or prescriptions.

In addition, there is the argument that it is not necessarily a bad thing to follow our moral intuitions when there is not a clearly preferred moral path. Weber made this argument in the form of the mutually supporting 'ethic of responsibility' and 'ethic of conviction'. In his view, every responsible politician must have a symbolic reference for their political action, otherwise this is destined to be meaningless and eventually to fail. Hence, it is inevitable that, especially for ordinary people and ordinary cases, integrity or the commitments and values that constitute integrity are an indispensable element toward recognizing impartial morality. Rules of impartiality share in an interactive relationship between both the 'agent-centred' and the 'outcome-centred' moral perspectives. Social morality and in extension social justice cannot exist if there is absolutely no conception of personal moral values, meaning that the 'agent-centred' perspective is vital for the cultivation of the 'outcome-centred' standpoint.

According to Mendus and McFall, this may happen for two reasons: first, the values and commitments that constitute integrity usually work as motivating factors in order for someone to act in accordance with the dictates of morality; thus they are needed for the recognition and cultivation of it: 'Without integrity, and the identity-conferring commitments it assumes, there would be nothing to fear the loss of, not because we are safe but because we have nothing to lose.'⁴⁵⁷ Second, these personal commitments may usually be ethically important themselves. So important in fact, that we cannot separate them from impartial morality even if we consider them as partial values: 'they can be both constitutive of integrity and a demand of impartial morality [...] To the extent that this is so, a demand to sacrifice integrity to morality should be treated with caution [...] And it may also be that any attack on integrity is an attack on the motivational foundation of impartial morality.'⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁵⁸ Mendus, *Politics and Morality*, 32-33.

Thus, our ethical commitments (personal integrity), which apparently derive from a plurality of general moral values, constitute the necessary moral element for the critique and operation of social roles, in general, and of political and public roles in particular. Public and political morality may be based upon a different set of moral values, acquiring thus a level of moral autonomy, but they are not altogether separated from private morality because this would make them meaningless and dysfunctional. Therefore, even though the tension between personal integrity and impartial morality is again recognized, the blunt distinction between private and public morality appears to be too simplistic. The tension between them is caused by our inability to define in exact terms the extent to which personal commitments are constitutive of impartial morality. How we recognize whether the personal values and ethical commitments can be reconciled or even constitute the demands of impartial demands that are ‘outcome-centred’ biased, is the problem at hand. In ‘ordinary’ life integrity (private morality) might undermine impartial (public) morality and vice versa; and the limits between them are left to be decided by moral agents in particular situations according to their ethical commitments or moral characters.

E) Assigning priority to the moral standpoint: The derivability problem

We saw that public and political roles carry with them peculiar duties which might be in conflict with private or ‘ordinary’ morality, but we also argued that to try to separate them altogether would be neither feasible nor desirable. We are left thus with the problem of finding the extents of their inter-determination. The central purpose is still to analyze the general relationship between politics and morality, and the fragmentation of values requires a clearer understanding of both the public and the political spheres as defined above and the importance of the moral character in relation to them. Thus, in order to be able to have a full account of how personal integrity is related to all the ‘outcome-centred’ types of values, it needs to be cross-examined separately, first with the basic values of what is considered to be public morality, and secondly, with those of political morality.

We have already extensively argued that public morality is fundamentally defined by moral principles of impartiality. This type of principles can be either of a consequentialist or of an ‘agent-centred’ nature. In the public sphere there is usually an attempt to strike a balance between them because the general interest of society is best served when treating its moral agents impartially. Therefore, it is clear that there is or

should be an interconnection and inter-determination between private morality and public morality. Nevertheless, as we have previously seen, there still is a high probability of conflict between them. This is a conflict that sometimes gives rise to arguments according to which it would be best to try and disconnect them as much as possible.

In his discussion on 'dirty hands' Martin Hollis makes a widely accepted point when he argues that the difference between private and public persons could be expressed by saying that private individuals acquire new moral duties with office: the specific moral demands of the role take priority over the 'ordinary' moral demands of private life. According to him, the example that corroborates this claim is that if I were a fireman sent to put out a fire in the school, then I should treat my children exactly like all others, because it is morally corrupt to use the powers of office to further personal relationships. And from this logically follows that the attempt to place universal moral requirements on everyone, whether in office or not, fails to resolve the moral dilemmas of office; and that, secondly, it is fallacious to argue that, where roles conflict, there must be a place to stand, which is prior to all roles, in order to umpire the conflict, exactly because there is no true human situation other than the web of social roles.⁴⁵⁹ This is similar to McFall's example of ship's captain but with somewhat different conclusions. What we have, here, is a recognition of the plurality of values that define different spheres of life, but also a complete rejection of private morality as a constituting and motivating factor when acting in the public sphere. We have argued that this might not be entirely correct or even desirable, but Hollis' example makes evident that office brings with it impartial moral duties which in some extreme cases will conflict with partial commitments of one's integrity. Thus, if some desire to execute their public duty they should not allow for private moral considerations to interfere.

In a similar line of reasoning, Thomas Nagel's article *Ruthlessness in Public Life* is an account of how we should tackle the tension between personal integrity and public morality when it comes to public action. His question is the natural outcome of his pluralist understanding of morality: is there a discontinuity between private and public morality and if there is what its nature is and what are its consequences? Nagel's main response to this question is articulated like this:

⁴⁵⁹ Martin Hollis, 'Dirty Hands', *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (October 1982), 393.

[E]thics, and the ethical basis of political theory, have to be understood as arising from a division in each individual between two standpoints, the personal and the impersonal. The latter represents the claims of the collectivity and gives them their force for each individual. If it did not exist, there would be no morality, only the clash, compromise, and occasional convergence of individual perspectives. It is because a human being does not occupy only his own point of view that each of us is susceptible to the claims of others through private and public morality. Any social arrangement governing the relations among individuals, or between the individual and the collective, depends on a corresponding balance of forces within the self – its image in microcosm. That image is the relation, for each individual, between the personal and the impersonal standpoints, on which the social arrangement depends and which it requires of us... [Thus] the hardest problems of political theory are conflicts within the individual, and no external solution will be adequate which does not deal with them at their source.⁴⁶⁰

This is a repetition of his own position that the insoluble problems of the relationship between politics and morality have their root in the irreducible plurality of values that permeates morality as a whole and is personified in individual moral agents by the basic dichotomy between ‘agent-centred’ vs. ‘outcome-centred’ moral standpoints. Nagel argues that political institutions and their theoretical justifications try to externalize the demands of the impersonal standpoint. However, they still have to be supported and brought to life by individuals for whom the impersonal standpoint coexists with the personal, and this brings us in front of the dead-end wherein institutions must promote impartiality without making unacceptable demands on individuals.⁴⁶¹ This dichotomy is of course a common view in political philosophy and its analysis started with Plato who suggested that the eradication of the conflicts within our souls should also eradicate any moral dilemmas and conflicts in our social and political life. However, there is also another commonly accepted argument –influenced by Aristotle’s response to Plato– that the moral capacities of human beings are limited and in combination with the plurality of values we could never live in a world with no moral conflicts at all.⁴⁶² In Nagel’s argument moral integrity is constituted by the personal and impersonal standpoints which correspond to the partial ethical commitments and the impartial (public) moral imperatives. The proportion of those commitments and imperatives determine the moral dispositions of the agents and consequently their public and political decisions.

⁴⁶⁰ Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (1991), 3-4.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁶² See Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.

Furthermore, Nagel believes that the question of the nature of the discontinuity between private and public morality and the assignment of priority to either the first or the latter must take one of two forms: either public morality will be derivable from private (conventional or ordinary) morality or it will not. And he proceeds to saying more about the derivability problem in order to give the question some content:

The interesting question is whether the special features of public morality can be explained in terms of principles already present at the individual level, which yield apparent moral discontinuities when applied to the special circumstances of public life. If so, then public morality is in a substantive and not merely trivial sense derivable from private morality. It emerges naturally from individual [general] morality under the conditions that define the individual's public role. This could still yield different moral requirements in two ways. Either the general principles could imply additional constraints on public action; or the principles could be such that certain requirements would cease to apply once one assumed a public role, because the conditions for their application would have disappeared... The alternative to derivability is that public morality is not grounded on individual morality, and that therefore people acting in certain official roles or capacities are required or permitted to do things that cannot be accounted for on that basis... [Thus] both derivability and non-derivability are formally suited to explain either the addition or the removal of restrictions in public morality; both can therefore explain the appearance of discontinuity.⁴⁶³

Nagel's own reply to the derivability problem as he conceives it is that neither private nor public morality is ultimate and that there is no reason to assume, that one would have to reach the private principles from general constraints of morality, and the public principles only from private constraints, as applied to public circumstances. In other words, he argues that there is non-derivability, but then he hastens to add that this does not mean that there is not a common place between private and public morality.⁴⁶⁴ Nagel explains this position with the theory about the two standpoints within the individual. The impersonal standpoint, he claims, produces in each of us a powerful demand for universal impartiality and equality (impartial morality), while the personal standpoint gives rise to individualistic motives and requirements which present obstacles to the pursuit and realization of such ideals. Therefore, the conflict within the individual translates into a situation where reconciliation between acceptable political ideals and acceptable personal moral principles seems practically impossible.⁴⁶⁵ His conclusion is that public morality may be underivable from private not because they

⁴⁶³ Thomas Nagel, 'Ruthlessness in Public Life', in Hampshire (ed.), *Public and Private Morality*, 78-79.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁶⁵ Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, 4.

come from different sources, but because each of them contains elements derived independently from a common source.⁴⁶⁶

The derivability problem is another title for the problem of whether it is correct to assign overriding priority to a specific set of moral values over all others; and the answer is again a negative-one. When a sphere of social conduct, which is dominated by a specific set of moral values, comes in contact with another sphere which is in turn dominated by a different set of moral values, there is going to be some kind of interaction. However, this interaction will not necessarily mean the overriding of one of the moral codes. For this reason, private morality neither overrides nor derives from public or political morality. Conversely public morality and political morality neither override nor derive from private morality. The only possible outcome of their interaction is either conflict or reconciliation of moral values upon common grounds. Following the Weberian reasoning, the ethical substance and the origins of these grounds do not matter in themselves insofar as they are sufficient for the creation of a stable symbolic reference for the existence of both the collectivity and its individual members.

F) *The conflicting nature of morality: utility against integrity*

The last element which must be made clearer in the triptych of the private, the public and the political is with regard to how public is different than political morality in relation to private morality. In principle public morality is dominated by values of impartiality, whereas political morality is dominated by the principle of utility. However, both spheres exist in relation to the social and their ultimate aim is to serve and promote the interests of society and not the self, being thus fundamentally of a consequentialist nature. This means that, *de facto*, public morality also draws on the principle of utility. Thus, the distinction between public and political morality can sometimes seem hazy or ambiguous. Nevertheless, or maybe because of this uncertainty, it is very important to understand why and how impartiality and utilitarianism undermine moral integrity in a different way. Impartial rules of public conduct are closer to deontic principles and thus closer to people's basic moral intuitions, making concepts such as fairness in public action more easily understandable and less prone to end up in dilemmatic situations. This is why, in Hollis' example, society might demand from the fireman to fulfil the duties of his assigned public role

⁴⁶⁶ Nagel, *Ruthlessness in Public Life*, 82.

and stay impartial during the difficult situation. Because everyone would wish that if they found themselves in the same unfortunate position they would be treated by the public official in a fair manner. In such a case, the impersonal standpoint can and will interact with the personal in order to reach an agreement regarding practical action, because impartial principles –in the form of basic moral intuitions– dominate both perspectives.

Politicians, as well as citizens in relation to politics, may find themselves in an infinitely more complex situation, in comparison to simple public officials, because political positions are especially problematic in relation to moral integrity. Politics adds a second threat to moral character which is the increased political attention to consequences,⁴⁶⁷ now in terms of utility, not impartiality. In addition, in the world of political action confusion about the limits between private and political morality can have destructive results, something that makes for extra psychological pressure on the agents involved. It may be that the agent's ethical commitments are in favour of impartial morality, making thus a suitable moral character for the public section, but it may also be that the agent's impartial morality constitutes an obstacle to efficient political action. Finally, an agent whose ethical commitments do not recognize other moral principles than that of utility may create a character potentially dangerous for politics and thus society as a whole.

Consequently, the argument is that politicians place greater stress on consequentialist moral reasoning and downplay the usually strong deontological prohibitions against acting in certain ways. When they do this, the public see them as lacking in moral integrity, as morally compromised and corrupt.⁴⁶⁸ Thus, C. A. J. Coady argues that in politics we should not allow operating at a level that is morally too abstract. If we want to avoid confusion we have to stick to the particular (moral) demands of political life without disconnecting ourselves from the contradicting demands of private or 'ordinary' morality.

The usual points about how the role of statesman makes a difference to what one is obliged and entitled to do, can also be made about such roles as parent or friend which are clearly on the private side of the divide, or about the role of teacher which straddles the distinction [...] There is an obvious truth in the idea that roles make a moral difference [...] But that truth is not something that somehow negates broad moral assessments since we need an overarching moral rationale for the existence of roles and the special permissions and duties

⁴⁶⁷ Mendus, *Politics and Morality*, 40.

⁴⁶⁸ De Wijze, 'The Challenge of a Moral Politics', 192.

that they involve [...] If the imperatives and permissions associated with roles were not under moral control, then those related to embezzler and burglar would have the same status as those of doctor and lawyer.⁴⁶⁹

All this takes us back to Nagel's basic dichotomy of moral values between the concerns with what will happen and the concerns with what one is doing. The first is a consequentialist concern (a concern for the outcomes of our actions) whereas the second is an action-centred concern (a concern for our lives as our own and with absolute claims of our moral integrity amongst others). The latter will obviously be setting restraints to the first, without nonetheless knowing exactly the extent of those restraints. This uncertainty makes the relationship between private and political morality so problematic as to render politics and morality a perennial theme of debate.

Thus, we should not only be concerned with the impartial demands of public morality, but also with the great danger for private morality that comes from the utilitarian demands of political morality. For Nagel, the interaction and conflict between these two aspects of morality (general moral principles and consequentialist imperatives) are familiar in private life, but when we apply the same dual conception to political institutions and activities the results are different; and the discontinuity between private and political morality mainly derives from that. He offers several reasons for this but the most generally acknowledged between theorists are the facts that 'institutions are not persons and do not have private lives, nor do institutional roles usually absorb completely the lives of their occupants [and that] public institutions are designed to serve purposes larger than those of particular individuals or families. They tend to pursue the interests of masses of people'. All this results in a different balance between the morality of outcomes and the morality of actions: 'Within the appropriate limits, public [and political] decisions will be justifiably more consequentialist than private ones. They will also have larger consequences to take into account.'⁴⁷⁰

In summary, this argument recapitulates what we have seen so far and makes a few more clear distinctions; i.e. that morality is a complicated subject and it becomes even more complex when we attempt to theorize it at different levels, that is, the private, public, and political levels. We should accept that there is a conflict between private and public morality and that the cause of this conflict lies in the tension between the partial demands of personal integrity (the personal standpoint) and the impartial

⁴⁶⁹ Coady, *Messy Morality*, 41-42.

⁴⁷⁰ Nagel, 'Ruthlessness in Public Life', 83-84.

demands of social morality (which are recognized by the impersonal standpoint), that are further intensified and complicated by the more specifically utilitarian demands of politics. All this is in agreement with the tradition that suggests how ordinary morality can be in tension with politics and why moral character takes a different meaning when discussing about public and political action. Nagel's basic claim is that the impersonal aspects of morality are or should be more prominent in the assessment of institutions than in the assessment of individual actions:

[A]s a result, the design of institutions may include roles whose occupants must determine what to do by principles different from those that govern private individuals. This will be morally justified, however, by ultimate considerations that underlie individual morality as well [...] My main contention is that the degree to which ruthlessness is acceptable in public life –the ways in which public actors may have to get their hands dirty– depends on moral features of the institutions through which public actions is carried out.⁴⁷¹

The importance that Weber attributed to private moral convictions as a constituting factor of public morality and as a necessary feature of a society able morally to criticize or justify public decisions and political action is not denied. Private morality will and should, in the end, set strong constraints to the consequentialist character of politics being either of impartial or utilitarian nature; and the limits of those constraints depend on the moral disposition of the agents involved in political situations. 'In these ways, we all live, as Taylor puts it "between the one and the many", though of course the stakes may be very much higher for the politician, the temptations greater, and the costs of error more public.'⁴⁷² This is essentially an acceptance of the discontinuity between private and public morality with the wish that the cases of ruthlessness in politics should be confined to the absolutely necessary by the pressures of private morality, due to the large scale of their consequences. On the other hand, given this discontinuity, we should also accept that personal integrity however positive may it be for our private lives, it can easily become a public vice when transferred to the world of politics without some prior qualifications. The point is that the different characteristics of public and political action, as described previously, entail a transvaluation of moral rules, when moving from the private to the public and political spheres, which should always be considered by the public officials, the politicians and those who should judge and criticize them.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁷² Mendus, *Politics and Morality*, 121.

Nagel's observation that 'Within the appropriate limits, public decisions will be justifiably more consequentialist than private ones', is an attempt to limit the scope of this transvaluation because, otherwise, we might get to knowing the cruel face of politics. As we have already mentioned, if this happened, there may be a lack of motivational moral principles for the constitution and moral verification of the public and political spheres in the first place. The scope of the transvaluation is not something stable or universally acceptable and thus it is a difficult and dangerous process. On the other hand, the transvaluation must be justified because, as we have also seen, politics does require, structurally, different moral behaviours. And this is exactly why the importance of moral disposition is so great within the political. Johnson stresses the point that certain moral dispositions exclude politics, are deeply incompatible with it, and in fact endanger it.⁴⁷³ But the conflict between politics and morality can also be alleviated by the moral disposition. In this sense, he is right to argue that the standard distinction between morality and politics has to be supplemented by a sharper recognition of the priority of moral dispositions; but this should not entail a denial to the logical importance of offices as opposed to office holders.⁴⁷⁴ This is because otherwise admirable moral integrities can always produce political disasters if not checked against a given set of socially recognizably values.

In front of the insurmountable discontinuity between morality and politics, then, we have to rely upon the moral disposition of those who are not socially restrained; i.e. political figures that will mediate the tension and can be relied to overcome the ethical dilemmas by justifiable ways. And this is why politics is so important morally. It is not only that partial morality cultivates the ground for the existence of public and political morality; it is also that political morality has normative importance. Philp explicates this importance by arguing about the huge impact of politicians' actions upon others; about the significance of their task toward ordering the society; and about the feature of politics which is concerned with the exercise of sovereign authority; i.e. the setting of the rules within which people act.⁴⁷⁵ Philp's argument is similar to Weber's argument as discussed previously: politics deserves a distinct moral position and a peculiar kind of judgment from everyone involved.

However, political morality should not be totally disconnected from private morality because those two distinct sets of values will inevitably meet each other in the

⁴⁷³ Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 249.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 252.

⁴⁷⁵ Philp, 'What is to be done?', 475.

practice of the political figure. Maybe this is why we should not desire a public figure that does not recognize moral dilemmas in politics. We should wish for politicians and public officials who have realized that the conduct of their official roles is a matter of great ethical importance, and their misconduct is a moral behaviour with normative significance. As Nagel notes ‘the opinion that in certain conditions a certain type of conduct is permissible has to be criticized and defended by moral argument.’⁴⁷⁶ When political conduct is judged to be permissible through the interaction of private moral considerations and public or political reasons we essentially achieve to connect politics and morality by focusing on the moral dispositions of the agents involved in a particular moral-political situation. In this sense, Williams is right to argue that politics, when conducted wisely, is a solution to the moral problem and not the cause of it. Political decisions are also moral decisions and this means that politics does not exclude ‘principle’; it includes it, but many other things as well.⁴⁷⁷

Nevertheless, despite the efforts that have been made towards a better understanding of all the interacting elements in the problematic relationship between politics and morality, their reconciliation still constitutes a paradox. Mendus’ understanding of this tension, from a pluralist perspective, is that in order to reconcile politics and morality we have to conceive the duties of the public and political roles, and the politicians’ relationship to them, as different from one cultural and historical context to another. Thus, the differences are not merely due to individual conscience but rather to the permanence of social pluralism.⁴⁷⁸ It is true that in this case the distinction between private and public or political moral demands seems to be an insufficient conception in relation to the tension between politics and morality. This tension has no simple general answer, because there is no simple context-free way to decide how private conscience and official political/social roles are properly weighed against each other. Thus, there always remains a considerable latitude of interpretation by the office holder which is guided by the mores and expectations of time and place and the specific demands of the particular problem that is to be faced.⁴⁷⁹

Of course, the considerable latitude of interpretation is what monistic moral traditions have struggled to eject from moral and political philosophy. In addition, pluralistic conceptions of morality have also made a warning about the relativistic

⁴⁷⁶ Nagel, ‘Ruthlessness in Public Life’, 90.

⁴⁷⁷ Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford (2008), 72-73.

⁴⁷⁸ See De Wijze’s argument on Susan Mendus’ understanding of moral pluralism and political morality, De Wijze, ‘The Challenge of a Moral Politics’, 192.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 192.

consequences of such a reliance on contextual interpretation. In other words, the tradition of value pluralism, although an improvement in comparison to monistic explanations of the relationship politics and morality, has not yet managed to offer a satisfying account regarding their conflict. Mendus, Nagel and Coady, among other pluralists, have therefore set the contemporary context of a classical problem, without nevertheless offering a normative solution. According to De Wijze, this mainly happens because they leave no room for the view that the tension between morality and politics cannot be resolved without the acceptance of the paradoxical possibility that an agent can do both moral wrong and right at the same time; something which the standard moral theories reject as confused and incoherent.⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 190.

7. Moral Agency, Political Agency and The ‘Dirty Hands’ Paradox

A) Moral dilemmas: The philosophical problem of ‘dirty hands’

The analysis of the moral dilemmas debate along with the more particular case of ethical conflicts between private, public and political spheres of action should have indicated that the problem of politics and morality is a deep philosophical one. The famous ‘dirty hands’ concept is often used, but not exclusively, in order to explicate moral conflicts within politics. However, based on the previous discussion regarding how different philosophical traditions generally conceive the possibility of moral conflicts, there are some misunderstandings that must be addressed in relation to political conduct and judgment when we refer to ‘dirty hands’ cases. Stephen de Wijze and Tom Goodwin argue that ‘dirty hands’ scenarios involve the following necessary and sufficient conditions:

- a) A justifiable betrayal of persons, values or principles.
- b) The agent is moved by moral considerations to commit moral violations.
- c) The agent participates in or is part of the causal link which furthers the evil projects of others.

Thus, ‘ “dirty hands” acts involve elements of both right and wrong. Put it differently, they require an agent to do wrong in order in to do right. This concept, while politically coherent, is deeply problematic, philosophically speaking.’⁴⁸¹

I would like to argue that there is a central connection between suggesting that moral dilemmas are central to the understanding of the relationship between politics and morality, and that ‘dirty hands’ are inevitable in moral actions in politics. In other words, the analysis of the historical accounts of the relationship between politics and morality revealed the perennial character of moral conflicts, and the ‘dirty hands’ concept is the political expression of those conflicts. John Parrish’s argument that ‘dirty hands’ is a concept which can help us understand the relationship between politics and

⁴⁸¹ Stephen A. De Wijze & Tom L. Goodwin, ‘Bellamy on Dirty Hands and Lesser Evils: A Response’, *BJPIR* (2009), Vol. 11, 532.

morality as a historically and theoretically traceable problem is then helpful and justified.⁴⁸² In both classical and modern times there were attempts either to resolve or accept the insolubility of moral conflicts and thus the tension between politics and morality. Schematically, those attempts can be understood in a similar manner we understand the distinction between contemplation (in the sense of theoretical knowledge) and action (in the sense of practical knowledge). The relation between contemplation and action can explain the move from the argument on moral dilemmas (as the central philosophical problem that defines politics and morality) to the argument of 'dirty hands' (as the practical expression of moral dilemmas).

We have discussed that the transition from classical to modern times can be explained by two factors; one related to the philosophical problem of morality; the other related to the distinction between the public and the political. Thus, first, we have the realization of the insoluble fragmentation of moral values, and second, we have the conflict between public and political moral values as an additional feature to the classical conflict between private and political moral values. Both factors, which signify the transition to modernity, are integral to the philosophy of moral pluralism, which conceives the tension in the relationship between politics and morality as unavoidable. However, deontic and utilitarian theories have dominated modern moral philosophy and have proposed holistic and simplified solutions to the problem of moral conflicts and, consequently, to the problem of political morality. In this sense, classical and modern attempts to resolve finally the problem of politics and morality are not so different. Where they are different is in their approach to the problem. In classical times, the interrelation of politics and morality was never completely overridden or overlooked (even in Plato's, most comprehensive, solution). In modern moral theories, politics seems to be irrelevant if we have resolved the problem of moral conflicts in the first place.

The simplification of the problem is mainly the outcome of a monistic understanding of moral and, consequently, political activity. Through the critical lens of deontological and consequentialist moral theory, it becomes clear that when facing a moral conflict 'there is a right choice to be made and no wrongdoing occurs when acting in this way. To maintain therefore (in the light of this critical assessment) that it is possible to have an action that is morally justified yet nevertheless also morally wrong is at best conceptual confusion.'⁴⁸³ We have seen how deontologists and

⁴⁸² See Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics*.

⁴⁸³ De Wijze & Goodwin, 'Bellamy on Dirty Hands', 532.

consequentialists attempt to explain this confusion based on the rejection of the ‘moral remainder’. Feeling guilty for an apparently wrong act does not necessarily mean that this act is indeed morally wrong. Hare, Ross, Nielsen and other moral theorists of those dominant modern philosophical traditions insist on the irrelevance of the moral dilemmas concept. Their arguments are based on the assumption that a critical prioritization of *prima facie* principles or the application of the principle of utility should resolve apparent moral conflicts only generating feelings such as compunction,⁴⁸⁴ but never generating any ‘moral remainder’.

We have seen that the response to this monistic understanding of morality comes from the generally defined philosophy of value pluralism. Although there are different accounts of value pluralism, the central argument of this tradition is that solutions to certain moral conflicts between different types of values are impossible. However, because in politics action is necessary, there will be cases where resolving the – philosophically insoluble – moral conflict by practical means would leave a moral remainder. This means that we can categorize moral conflicts under two basic types: those that are philosophically irresolvable and remain as such without any serious consequences for the moral agents; and those that are resolvable but tragic because their solution entails the permanent moral corruption or death of the moral agent.⁴⁸⁵ The latter case is what we typically find in political conduct and is essentially what we call ‘dirty hands’. The ‘dirty hands’ concept refers to an immoral action perpetrated in order to promote or achieve a moral end which is assumingly of higher importance. It is not a theoretical concept of corruption. It is an ethical problem related to political conduct. It refers to the dilemma caused by ethical considerations in the search for a desirable political end which *de facto* includes ontological aims, but also it entails violation of opposing moral principles. Therefore, within the pluralist tradition, the ‘dirty hands’ concept is a necessary analytical tool towards understanding why the proposed (by the dominant moral theories) conceptual confusion regarding moral conflicts is mistaken.

Following the line of reasoning that has been established so far, the ‘dirty hands’ concept should be contrasted to the monistic failure to acknowledge the existence of ‘impossible oughts’:

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 533.

⁴⁸⁵ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 76-77.

These are oughts we are unable to obey because they violate our deep sense of integrity and moral worth. In the ‘ticking bomb’ scenario, for example, although the torture is ‘justifiable’, even obligatory, given the duties of the politician, the act of torturing nonetheless leaves the agent morally polluted for so acting. Therefore, cases [of dirty hands] involve more than just the issue of how are we to act in such circumstances. Those values that have been overridden retain their moral relevance even if they are not action-guiding [...] The standard moral theories neglect this possibility because they are focused entirely on the action-guiding aspect of moral claims. As a result, they fail to realise that when a much-cherished moral value does not guide our practical reason, this does not entirely eliminate its influence on what we are, or have become, by acting as we did.⁴⁸⁶

This means that the ‘dirty hands’ concept also refers to the practical solution of such a moral dilemma not as a way of permanently overriding the value of the moral principle, i.e. as a way of resolving the problem in theory, but as a way of accepting the moral consequences for its circumstantial solution.

Although, as we have already discussed, the philosophical problem of moral conflicts and consequently that of ‘dirty hands’ cases is not limited to the tension between morality and politics as two different ethical spheres, it is the distinction between public and private moral norms that systematically creates such insoluble conflicts with tragic consequences for the agents involved. In public and political life it is more likely to face the predicament as posed by Thrasymachus and then Machiavelli’s Prince; that is, those who wield political power should be wise enough to act immorally only to survive the immorality of those whom they rule. Both Plato and Machiavelli grappled with this problem within their respective political contexts and attempted to resolve the paradox which is essentially what constitutes the ‘dirty hands’ problem: when ‘good persons faced with the evil projects or actions of others, are forced to act in ways that are justified, even morally obligatory, yet nevertheless somehow wrong’.⁴⁸⁷ However, facing the ‘evil acts of others’ is not the only scenario of moral conflict because the definition of ‘universal evil’ within a pluralist world is a peculiar case which needs not be discussed here. Conflicts arise, as we have seen, because moral agency might be predicated on different meanings of moral value. What is of importance is the public and politically formative character of the interaction between conflicting sets of values.

⁴⁸⁶ De Wijze & Goodwin, ‘Bellamy on Dirty Hands’, 533-534.

⁴⁸⁷ Stephen de Wijze, ‘Defining Evil: Insights from the Problem of “Dirty Hands”’, *The Monist*, Vol. 85, No. 2, Evil, (April 2002), 212.

We have reviewed how Nagel's argument explains the discontinuity between private and public morality as an expression of the division of the self, which is produced by the coexistence of the personal standpoint with the values deriving from the initial judgment of the impersonal standpoint. Nagel says that '[t]he special features of public morality can be explained in terms of principles already present at the individual level, which yield apparent moral discontinuities when applied to the special circumstances of public life'.⁴⁸⁸ We have also referred to the crucial distinction between the public and the political nature of these circumstances. The distinction is based on the fact that within the political 'order' these circumstances are related to the consequentialist character of politics, which are expressed through utilitarian policies, whereas the public 'order' is organized around values of impartiality. In the end, we argued that, whether we speak of the public or the political, there is a fundamental tension that separates both from private or 'ordinary' morality. The analysis of this tension is indispensable regarding the problematic relationship between politics and morality in general. According to Nagel 'We must ask not only what type and degree of contribution to impersonal aims can reasonably be asked of divided creatures like ourselves, but also how we or our circumstances might reasonably hope to be transformed so that a life which better meets both sets of demands would become possible for us. This shows the connection between the ethics of individual conduct and political theory.'⁴⁸⁹

Hence, we have outlined why moral dilemmas of a tragic nature seem to arise more frequently in politics than anywhere else and, starting from that premise, we have to investigate what features of politics have historically been recognized as giving rise to such moral dilemmas.⁴⁹⁰ What we have assumed so far is that the conflict between different moral claims is an inescapable characteristic of human action. Moral dilemmas and paradoxes are a general and not an exclusively political phenomenon. However, the nature of the conflicting principles in politics makes moral dilemmas (which might otherwise be considered ordinary) more acute. To try and resolve these dilemmatic situations by proposing comprehensive ethical guidelines often proves to be not only unrealistic but also counterproductive. This is why the 'dirty hands' problem should not be reduced to cases of political corruption and ordinarily understood immoral practices. On the contrary it should be conceived as the political expression of

⁴⁸⁸ Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, 14.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 16-17.

⁴⁹⁰ Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics*, 13.

value pluralism; i.e. ‘dirty hands’ are the political outcome of an otherwise insoluble moral conflict. They are the, the politically identified, moral remainder and they must be judged as such.

Two core claims underlie their paradoxical and special quality. The first is that dirty hands scenarios are those situations where an agent is forced to do wrong in order to do right because the ‘complex of immorality in which she finds herself’ makes it impossible to do good and only good [...] Secondly, no matter how the agent decides to act in such circumstances, she will be guilty of a moral violation with the attendant moral opprobrium or pollution that adheres to so acting [...] In dirty hands scenarios, even if it is clear how we should act, this does not negate the non-action-guiding values which will be violated. Our ethical lives are more complex than the practical reason issue of how we ought to act in a given situation, especially in situations of irresolvable conflict.⁴⁹¹

Monistic approaches to complex philosophical problems may suggest simplified, holistic and, thus, reductive theoretical solutions. These approaches are counterproductive because, in reality, they make the paradoxes more difficult than they were in the first place. These approaches typically conceive politics as a field to be dominated by morality, only to exacerbate their conflict when the time for a real decision comes. What they fail to understand is that it is by means of this domination that most problems become accentuated and that moral situations which involve political action become more paradoxical. One of the purposes of the short history of politics and ethics as interrelated fields was to illustrate that most attempts to apply a perfect political theory as an extension of a perfect moral theory are essentially unrealistic.

The more realistic state of affairs with regards to moral conflicts and political conduct would be to adopt a specific understanding of morality which accepts the existence of moral dilemmas as an inescapable feature of a variety of human societies. The tradition of value pluralism argues that there are different but equivalent and irreducible types of values and principles which derive from our very complex way of life. The complexity of our way of life is ultimately intractable which means that it is impossible for morality to be perfectly systematized –when this is attempted it results in aggravating the inherent contradictions within ethics. Thus, as a reaction to philosophical monism there is the view that politics should be considered as totally

⁴⁹¹ De Wijze, ‘The Challenge of a Moral Politics’, 196. De Wijze explains ‘complex immorality’ as ‘a situation where there is no morally cost-free course of action. All possible actions, and indeed failures to act, carry significant moral costs that must be recognised, understood and accepted by agents.’

separated from morality so we can avoid confusions and achieve a satisfactory level of efficiency. In other words, this view suggests, political values, which include moral claims of impartiality and utility, form a seemingly autonomous sphere within our moral universe.

Nevertheless, as we have argued in the preceding chapters, public and political action is where moral dilemmas become more prominent, because the dominating principle of action in politics makes the basic dichotomy of moral values more effective than in any other sphere of social action. Several theorists have referred to this basic dichotomy as between the 'agent-centred' and 'outcome-centred' moral values; between the personal and impersonal moral standpoints; between partial and impartial integrity; or between conscience and efficiency in action etc. The common point of this basic dichotomy of values is that the conflicting nature of morality cannot be reduced to single and overriding principles because these two categories of values are autonomously constituted. Therefore, we either end up with an understanding of politics as irrelevant to morality or with an understanding of politics as dominated by morality. In the first case political conduct, in order to be successful, must be characterized by an amoralist attitude, whereas in the second case political conduct is judged to be unsuccessful if characterized by an immoral attitude. Hence moral agency is an already controversial concept, which nevertheless tends to be even more problematic when it must translate into political agency. The outcome of this conceptual confusion is to have concepts such as 'immoral politics' equated to 'dirty hands', or 'amoral politics' as being the only viable solution of political realism.

B) Moral and political integrity: What is to have 'dirty hands'?

Philosophical monism on the one hand, and pluralism on the other are fundamentally distinguished in their perspectives regarding the significance and purpose of moral agency and, as a consequence, of political agency. This distinction leads to different approaches regarding the character of politics and the role of politicians. For monistic approaches the purpose of agency usually refers to the moral progression of the agent (either individually or collectively), whereas for value pluralism the ethical aim is an improved understanding of the world of moral values. Thus, in the first case, the significance of moral agency is limited to the success or failure of applying a strict and all-inclusive moral programme (for both politicians and common citizens). In the second case the quality of moral agency is judged by the ability to act and live morally

in a consistent manner, knowing that this may sometimes be impossible (especially within politics for all the reasons mentioned previously). In the preceding chapters we attempted to locate how these two different philosophical approaches conceive the problem of moral dilemmas in general and, by extension, the tension between private and public or political moral demands. The aim was to offer an explanation of how private morality may clash with public and political morality within the frame of moral dilemmas. This explanation should yield a better understanding with regard to how moral agency may remain consistent when it has to translate into political agency. The last problem to be answered concerns the possibility of moral consistency or integrity of political agents. When this integrity is impossible both in philosophical and practical terms, despite the efforts of the agents to understand and the resolve the moral predicament as best as possible, then there is quite possibly a case of ‘dirty hands’.

The assumption, in respect to the tension between private and public moral principles, is that it may not be proper to resolve the conflict by means of imposing morality upon politics altogether (the monistic view which would make political action either impossible or cruel), or by means of distinguishing between two different and altogether autonomous worlds: that of morality and that of politics (an extreme form of political realism, an expression of relativism, which would dissolve any universal moral criteria for politics and make thus political judgment and criticism impossible). How should we then approach the ‘necessity of dirty hands’ in politics?

Morality should be conceived as one system, which includes several types of values, distinguished but also interrelated, including those that dominate politics, according to the pluralist view. Thus ‘ordinary’, conventional or general morality is the outcome of the interaction of all these different types of values. Of course, ‘ordinary’ morality is contextually defined. However, this interaction cannot be identical for every person, making, therefore, personal integrity a highly subjective matter which illustrates the variable nature of morality itself. In this sense, ‘ordinary’ morality is depicted in the pluralism of personal integrities and their interaction with the socially established moral rules. ‘Ordinary’ morality derives from the relation of the ‘value orders’ within a social context. This is why it is difficult for ‘ordinary’ morality to be systematized theoretically (in terms of prioritizing values), even in a contextualized manner. Still, ‘ordinary’ morality is maintained and cultivated through social and private institutions in socially conventional ways. This is also why in some pluralist views ‘ordinary’ morality is sometimes considered to be separated from the more exclusive, and thus more easily codified, public and political morality. Philosophical monism, on the other

hand, claims that this codification, or 'scientification', is possible for ethics as a whole and therefore there is no need to separate 'ordinary' morality from politics.

'Ordinary' morality, as constituted by the pluralism of private ethical commitments, is usually distinguished from public and political morality because these two moral subsystems have been found to threaten personal integrities in some particular ways, and vice versa. However, we have argued that this does not generally mean that political morality is always in conflict with the other types of morality; it may mean that integrity as a concept illustrates how the irreducible pluralism of values makes moral conflict very probable within the self and, in extension, between the self and the social roles that the self must fulfill. We have also argued, more significantly, that personal integrity, as a depiction of 'ordinary' morality, is a necessary motivating element for the existence of a morally well-functioning public and political sphere in the first place. This understanding of morality may be against both those who very easily separate the concepts of moral and political integrity and, thus, between moral and political agency (traditions of relativism or amorality); and those who claim that there is only moral virtue and that political virtue should simply be in accordance with it (philosophical monism).

Political integrity should be considered as an autonomously constituted element of moral integrity in the same way as political virtue is an element of moral virtue. There is a direct inter-determination between them, even if sometimes they can undermine each other. This means that an understanding of 'dirty hands' as a version of the problem between private and public morality may be wrong. The balance of the different types of moral values in each of the personal integrities is the result of the characters' moral and intellectual habituation. This carries us back to the constitution of the moral self and its realization through the conduct of social, and in particular public and political roles. According to MacIntyre, if moral agents wish to achieve this self-realization, they will occasionally have to deliberate responsibly about the established moral standards, whatever verdict they may arrive at in the end. 'Disagreements about what these evaluative and normative standards prescribe and what awareness of their authority consists in have not precluded widespread agreement in ascribing to normal adult human beings as such a capacity that makes them responsible as individuals for not putting their established social and cultural order to the question'.⁴⁹² This indicates

⁴⁹² Alasdair, MacIntyre, 'Social Structures and their Threats to Moral Agency', delivered as the Annual Lecture of the Royal Institute of Philosophy on February 24 1999, Cambridge Journals, *Philosophy* 74 (1999), 314.

that moral agency includes the ability to recognize and criticize the imperfections of a given moral system in its social and political context.

MacIntyre's conception of moral agency is based on a similar, to what we have seen so far, understanding of the self in relation to social roles, but results into a different, contextualized –however not relativistic– understanding of morality. According to him, there are two basic elements that define the moral character; first, it is integrity, and second, it is constancy:

To have integrity is to refuse to be, to have educated oneself so that one is no longer able to be, one kind of person in one social context, while quite another in other contexts. It is to have inflexible limits to one's adaptability to the roles that one may be called upon to play. Constancy, like integrity, sets the limits to flexibility of character [...] constancy requires that those who possess it pursue the same goods through extended periods of time, not allowing requirements of changing social context to distract them from their commitments or to redirect them [...] So individuals [will] be inhabitants of not just one, but of two moral systems, that of the established social order with its assignment of roles and responsibilities and that developed within those milieus in which the assignment has been put to the question. The degree to which these two systems are at odds with each other varies in different social and cultural orders.⁴⁹³

MacIntyre's definition of integrity is based upon the concept of inflexible adaptability of our ethical commitments in terms of place and time. For him, the moral dichotomy between the personal and the impersonal standpoints (here called the moral system of social roles and the moral system that criticizes those roles from an individual point of view) is again recognized as the most basic feature of morality. Moral agency is defined by principles which derive from everyday practices in combination with the ability to integrate the principles that permeate the public and political sphere of social life, without making actual moral agency impossible.

Mendus' central argument offers a similar approach to resolving the moral paradoxes that derive from the inconsistency between moral and political agency.⁴⁹⁴ Understanding the social role of a politician in the particular and cultural context should thus be sufficient in order to explain away the potential conflict. Therefore, paradoxical situations, where we may do wrong in order to do right are not paradoxical anymore. They have been paradoxical in the first place because we have failed to understand

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 317-318.

⁴⁹⁴ De Wijze, 'The Challenge of a Moral Politics', 197.

correctly the context in which the politician's social role is carried out.⁴⁹⁵ However, the history of the relationship between politics and ethics is meant to show exactly this; i.e. that moral conflicts seem to persist, notwithstanding our attempts to understand them as a result of a contextual tension between social roles and individual conscience. In a way the problem between politics and morality reflects the general problem of moral conflicts, but its solution does not lie in a simple understanding of its contextual characteristics, as Mendus argues.⁴⁹⁶ In this respect, MacIntyre, even if not commencing from a value pluralism perspective, is correct to indicate that moral agency is the ability to criticize the imperfections of a given moral context and maybe go into conflict with it.

Value pluralism must therefore include in its philosophical understanding of moral conflicts the idea that we cannot assign priority to either moral agency or political agency, because they are irreducible to each other, and they very often are in conflict. However, they are strongly interrelated, or they should be for their betterment. On the contrary, monistic explanations of morality conceive integrity as the outcome of assigning absolute priority to one standpoint over the other. It is obvious that from these two different perspectives about the basic dichotomy of moral values we would not only arrive at different definitions of integrity, but as a consequence we would get different definitions of what political agency should be and how political and public roles should be fulfilled. Nevertheless, it is in the very nature of personal integrity to be undermined firstly by the impartial demands and, more importantly, by the utilitarian demands of political consequentialism. This makes any prioritization of values impossible, hence the urge to separate politics from morality altogether as a response to monistic approaches.

The moral conflict will always take place within the individual and, by extension, between private moral principles, on the one hand, and political or consequentialist demands, on the other. 'So to be a moral agent is to have the potentiality for living and acting in tension or, if need be, conflict between two moral points of view. And this is never simply or mainly a tension or conflict between points of view at the level of abstract and general theory. It is always primarily a tension or a conflict between socially embodied points of view, between modes of practice.'⁴⁹⁷ MacIntyre is right to argue that the key moral question is how best to find our way

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 197.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 197.

⁴⁹⁷ MacIntyre, 'Social Structures', 318.

through this conflict, which is directly related to the problem of ‘dirty hands’ and moral character in politics. Therefore, understanding the conflicting and simultaneously interactive nature of values is a necessary premise upon which one can pursue their reconciliation.

Thus, in an Aristotelian sense, the good man and the good politician coincide when they are characterized by this deep understanding of ethics in combination with the ability to apply it in particular practical situations, both in politics and ordinary life. Practical wisdom does not only refer to political wisdom. For him, when man realizes his moral potential private and political life cannot be distinguished –whether man has this potential or not is a different ontological issue, which Aristotle left in ambiguity. Moral virtue is not therefore necessarily threatened by political virtue. It is in tension with it, but without this tension there can exist neither of them. The same goes for most ‘value orders’ which constitute the essence of ‘ordinary’ morality. Therefore, it is not entirely correct to argue that when we have to think and act politically we at the same time have to sacrifice our moral integrities. This indicates that ‘dirty hands’ in politics as ‘immoral’ politics is a misconception of both the political and ethical discourses. In reality, as mentioned previously, the ‘dirty hands’ concept is a way of describing the complex situation in which the moral character must compromise utilitarian and impartial demands with private ethical commitments. This does not only happen within politics, but it happens there more often than not.

When faced with choosing between the lesser of two evils, or forced to act so that a much cherished moral principle will be violated, moral persons find that they are stained or polluted by having so to act. Even though they were moved by moral considerations or obligations to commit moral violations, the result is “dirty hands,” the loss of moral innocence and the knowledge that they have been a willing and active causal link in the furthering of evil projects.⁴⁹⁸

The political question that naturally arises from all those considerations is then ‘How can a government [or politicians in general] be satisfactorily ethical?’⁴⁹⁹ According to Williams, Plato and Machiavelli’s political expositions can be conflated into ‘How can the good rule the world as it is?’ which is then followed by ‘How a political system should be?’⁵⁰⁰ However, a critical approach to both Plato and

⁴⁹⁸ De Wijze, ‘Defining Evil’, 216.

⁴⁹⁹ Joel L. Fleishman, Lance Liebman & Mark H. Moore, (eds.), *Public Duties*, ix.

⁵⁰⁰ Williams, ‘Politics and Moral Character’, 68-69.

Machiavelli's political philosophies has certainly implied that this might be a deceiving question. Also, Weber's theory on moral pluralism consistently argued that the separation between 'the good' and 'the world as it is' is not entirely correct or realistic. Reality and value are relative things but still related to human judgment. Thus, the good incorporates the world as it is because goodness is not the same as innocence; innocence is contradictory with active life, as it is moral absolutism. Whether someone is good or not is to be judged in real life situations where efficiency and goodness are not clearly distinguished, resulting in impossibility for innocence.⁵⁰¹ Innocence demands absence from action, whereas goodness demands engaging in moral conflict. Integrity is the outcome of this conflict like 'ordinary' morality is the outcome of the fermentation of 'value orders'. Goodness cannot be identified with one being morally impeccable; it is not equivalent to innocence.⁵⁰² From a realistic perspective goodness can only be identified with one doing what is morally possible and best in certain circumstances. In this sense, one does not have to avoid participating in politics in order to be good.

Thus, we should answer the question about the nature of the political system under the auspices of a different understanding of ethics, i.e. the political system should be able to incorporate and prioritize values according to the suggestions of value pluralism. The 'dirty hands' concept can help us do that, through the examination of the relationship between rules of conduct (which can be deontic, utilitarian or a mix of them in nature) and the moral character:

The notion of dirty hands derives from an effort to refuse "absolutism" without denying the reality of the moral dilemma. Though this may appear to utilitarian philosophers to pile confusion upon confusion, I propose to take it very seriously [...] Let me begin, then, with a piece of conventional wisdom to the effect that politicians are a good deal worse, morally worse, than the rest of us (it is the wisdom of the rest of us) [...] [This] suggests that the dilemma of dirty hands is a central feature of political life, that it arises not merely as an occasional crisis in the career of this or that unlucky politician but systematically and frequently.⁵⁰³

It is an ontological argument to say that human rationalism has certain limits which cannot be overcome. Therefore, the view that despite our best efforts we have not succeeded in constructing a governmental system that is independent of the moral

⁵⁰¹ Johnson, *Politics, Innocence*, 13.

⁵⁰² Ibid., 13.

⁵⁰³ Walzer, 'Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands', 162.

qualities of its leaders⁵⁰⁴ is in accordance to a pluralist view of morality which accepts this ontological assumption (going back to Aristotle). Therefore, the significance of the moral character in fulfilling a system of imperfect moral rules which frequently generates moral dilemmas becomes more and more obvious. The significance of the moral character depends on how the essence of the rules of conduct is conceived. Political and public institutions are imperfect because those who designed them are imperfect. Hence it lies within the abilities and the quality of the political agent to resolve those moral as well as practical conflicts, which derive from these imperfections. This is where the usefulness of the ‘dirty hands’ concept lies.

It is not entirely correct then to say, as Mendus states, that the ‘dirty hands’ argument revolves around the idea ‘that politics as a profession demands a *willingness* to depart from moral goodness.’⁵⁰⁵ A further consideration of the definitions of moral integrity and goodness indicates that this is a simplistic understanding of the character of politics. This is because according to value pluralism, in some cases, there are no stable criteria according to which we can claim a departure from goodness or an assimilation of evil practices. Monistic understandings of morality, on the other hand, would not accept that there can even be such a concept as ‘dirty hands’. Because cases of ‘dirty hands’ emanate from the distinction between private and public or political morality; i.e. from clashes between equally valued and irreducible to each other moral principles. A monistic explanation of moral and political conduct would reject that those clashes are an inherent feature of ethics and thus it would *de facto* reject the possibility of ‘dirty hands’.

In the end, the ‘dirty hands’ concept is the natural political outcome of the irreducible value pluralism which characterizes ethics. When there is a perfect moral system there can be no ‘dirty hands’ in the above sense because no one would have to violate an otherwise inviolable value in order to achieve a ‘higher’ moral end. Prior prioritization of moral values or an overriding principle would resolve such an – otherwise dilemmatic– situation *ad initium*. In this instance, the ‘dirty hands’ problem would be reduced to cases of corruption. Nonetheless, we have argued that the conflict between private and political morality cannot be reduced to cases wherein promoting self-interest is at odds with public interest; i.e. the ‘dirty hands’ concept is not related to cases of corruption. In this sense De Wijze and Goodwin are right to define a ‘dirty hands analysis as one which is used in order to evaluate the normative aspects of

⁵⁰⁴ Moore, ‘Realms of Obligation and Virtue’, 3–4.

⁵⁰⁵ Mendus, *Politics and Morality*, 7.

morally complex political situations.⁵⁰⁶ According to them, the concept of ‘dirty hands’ can help us demonstrate ‘that within ethical theory there is the conceptual or theoretical space to claim that it is possible (even laudatory) to do the right thing yet, nevertheless, at the same time also be guilty of serious wrongdoing’.⁵⁰⁷

For the same reasons, ‘dirty hands’ situations are also impossible when morality and politics are considered to be unrelated. The politician cannot act in a morally ambiguous manner when there are no general moral rules to be violated. This argument reveals how thin is the line that separates moral absolutism from pure amorality when one has to make practical decisions. This is the argument that has been repeated in almost all versions of political ethics as illustrated in the preceding chapters: politics without symbolic references is a groundless, arbitrary and thus doomed to fail process. This is why Walzer begins his famous analysis of the problem of ‘dirty hands’ by asking whether there are real moral dilemmas or not. Walzer’s argument makes a good case against utilitarianism which is the dominating moral feature in politics. This criticism is based on the pluralist view that not only is the existence of a real moral dilemma possible, but also that whether frequently or very rarely any of us might one day face it. ‘Indeed’ Walzer says ‘many men have faced it, or think they have, especially men involved in political activity or war [...] In modern times the dilemma appears most often as the problem of “dirty hands.”’⁵⁰⁸

According to him, philosophical monism, in the form of utilitarianism, would juxtapose against this view three extensive arguments⁵⁰⁹ –which have already been analyzed in their moral context, but they are now directly related to political conduct: first, that every political choice ought to be made solely in terms of its particular and immediate circumstances. The good man will face difficult practical choices but he will never face a real moral dilemma, because the morality of his conduct will be judged by the overriding utility of his decision. In this case, even when the politician lies and tortures his hands will be clean. There will be no moral remainder because there was no immoral act in the first place. This is, according to Walzer, an attractive description of moral decision-making, but it is also a very improbable one, because as we have argued so far the essence of morality lies in the interrelation between the private and the social. The quality of both the moral and political agency lies in the ability to reconcile the rules and values of those different spheres and also, as MacIntyre suggested, in the

⁵⁰⁶ De Wijze & Goodwin, ‘Bellamy on Dirty Hands’, 529.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 529.

⁵⁰⁸ Walzer, ‘Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands’, 161.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 169-173.

ability to challenge and criticize them. But ‘the experience of coming up against these rules, challenging their prohibitions [...] is so obviously important that no account of moral decision-making can possibly come to grips with it.’⁵¹⁰

Hence the second utilitarian argument: ‘such rules do indeed exist, but they are not really prohibitions of wrongful actions [...] They are moral guidelines, summaries of previous calculations. They ease our choices in ordinary cases[.]’⁵¹¹ This argument refers to Hare’s criticism upon the function of intuitions as moral guidelines. Politics, according to this utilitarian approach, constitutes a social section where exceptional moral situations happen more often than in ordinary life, but they do not really differ qualitatively. Thus, as in ordinary life we have to use the utility principle in order to override our intuitional prohibitions, similarly in politics when a decision is based on sound calculative processes there cannot be a moral crime. Ergo, the impossibility of both the ‘dirty hands’ argument and the feeling of guilt as a moral remainder lies in the superiority of utility in resolving conflicts.

The opposite argument from a pluralist view is that utility cannot generally override all other moral claims; not only because this appears to be counter-intuitive, but also because we cannot philosophically establish the supremacy of one set of moral values over the others. The corollary political argument, according to Walzer, is that when politicians must violate, in practice, a moral principle which is inviolable in theory, they do not simply explain their conduct in terms of justification, but they also ask for forgiveness or to be excused: ‘an excuse is typically an admission of fault; a justification is typically a denial of fault and an assertion of innocence.’⁵¹² Thus, when politicians are not ready to commit a morally faulty action they appear to be absolutists and irresponsible from a realist perspective. On the other hand, when they are ready to offer justifications but never excuses for a morally condemnable action they are probably not taking seriously the morally formative importance of political conduct.

However, the question remains: does feeling guilty mean that there really is a moral dilemma? Walzer, like Williams, argues that it does so. The feeling of guilt is the necessary ‘moral remainder’ which shows that when moral rules are practically violated, in extreme situations, they are not at the same time cancelled or annulled. This is why this feeling is a crucial feature of our moral life according to Walzer. ‘Hence the third utilitarian argument, which recognizes the usefulness of guilt and seeks to explain

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., 169.

⁵¹¹ Ibid., 161.

⁵¹² Ibid., 170.

it [...] And so a good man will respect the rules rather than he would if he thought them merely guidelines, and he will feel guilty when he overrides them [...] Because of those feelings he will never be in a hurry to override them[.]’⁵¹³ The problem with this final argument, Walzer says, is that it conceives the ‘moral remainder’ in utilitarian terms, reducing thus, again, the meaning of both the moral agent and morality itself to simple calculations: can then someone feel guilty, for good utilitarian reasons, when he has no reason for believing that he really is guilty?’⁵¹⁴ In other words, when the politician adopts the monistic approach of a utilitarian account of morality he or she will inevitably end up feeling guilty less and less as he or she engages in political agency. This brings us back to the *amoral* face of politics.

C) Private life and public office: Some accounts of the ‘dirty hands’ problem

Parrish summarizes the several aspects which attribute this special, morally obscure and problematic, character to politics as they have been analyzed so far: first is violence; the political state acts with a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence and coercive means. ‘States must command, and must compel those who disobey their commands to comply, by force if necessary.’ Another quality of political life that, according to Parrish, makes moral action more difficult is ‘the frequent presence of ruthless and unscrupulous competition.’ Third, and mostly related to contemporary politics, is the special status held by the claims of universalism, neutrality, and the objective point of view; an inclination towards impartiality that tends to rule out the consideration of particularities. Finally, and most importantly, in politics, claims of large-scale social benefits seem to possess a peculiar moral importance: ‘in no other scene of human life is it the case that the well-being of so many can be shaped so profoundly by the decisions of so few.’⁵¹⁵ Weber and Nagel established where this difference between the moral importance of political or public institutions and private conduct lies. This same difference, or the peculiar moral demands that separate private from collective action, is what distinguishes moral (as in ‘ordinary’ morality) from political responsibility.

Generally speaking, the problem of ‘dirty hands’ arises more sharply in democratic political societies (but not only in there) due to the fact that, in a democracy, authority is formally wielded by the whole body politic but it is executed by its

⁵¹³ Ibid., 171.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 172.

⁵¹⁵ Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics*, 13-14.

representatives. We must remember that when a body politic claims moral permission for its government to undertake morally ambiguous actions, it acknowledges that it shares responsibility for those actions. In other words, when *we* claim moral permission for our governments to undertake on our behalf morally dubious deeds, as they will inevitably do, we do so at the cost of acknowledging ourselves as co-perpetrators of those deeds.⁵¹⁶ In other words in a democracy we might transfer our right to make political decisions to our representatives, but this does not mean that we also fully transfer our moral responsibility for these decisions. After all, the representatives do represent *us*. Nevertheless, according to Richard Bellamy,⁵¹⁷ we usually set higher moral standards for politicians than those we set for ourselves. Do such double standards make not politicians but us ordinary citizens the hypocrites? Or does politics require we hold politicians to a higher standard of moral judgment to that we apply to ourselves? The question somewhat simplifies the moral problem, but the answer ultimately lies in how we understand the balance between our personal and impersonal standpoints and, consequently, in how we conceive the resulting discontinuity between private and public or political morality.

Hollis' article on 'dirty hands' attempts to answer these questions and similarly starts from the argument about the interplay between private life and public office. Hollis upholds the view about responsibility in a democratic polity: politicians are *our* agents and their 'dirty hands' are *ours*, he claims. However, he does not mean that the citizens are always to blame for all the sins of their uncivil servants, since, he assumes, offices can be abused or the state apparatus lose its claim to legitimacy. 'But even where the government truly represents the people, there may be dirty work for it to do; and then its dirty work is ours. That is what groups a secretary of state, who orders a massacre, together with a soldier, who executes one, and sets both apart from a company chairman, who orders a lie, and salesman, who tells it. Are there, then, officers of state who have a moral duty to do for us what we would be morally wrong to do for ourselves?'⁵¹⁸ If the answer to this question is positive then we cannot at the same time claim that we should hold politicians to a higher standard of moral judgment to that we apply to ourselves.

However, we should not go so far as to consider that the 'dirty hands' concept only refers to a clash between public and private morality. The conflict of values is

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., 181.

⁵¹⁷ Richard Bellamy, 'Dirty Hands and Clean Gloves: Liberal ideals and real politics', *European Journal of Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (October 2010), 415.

⁵¹⁸ Hollis, 'Dirty Hands', 389.

certainly more acute in politics for all the reasons analyzed already. But ‘it is important not to slip into a commonly held error that simply because cases [of ‘dirty hands’] occur more frequently and dramatically in politics (and, more generally, in public life) this means that this clash between public and private values is the defining feature of the [‘dirty hands’] problem.’⁵¹⁹ De Wijze and Goodwin emphasize here the need to understand the political expression of ‘dirty hands’ as a deeper philosophical problem, i.e. the necessary and sufficient conditions for ‘dirty hands’ cases are not embedded in the roles of political or public life, but lie elsewhere. This is why, according to Walzer, even if one rightly follows the utilitarian reasoning in order to resolve a politically complex situation one will still feel guilty because of a moral wrong.⁵²⁰

Walzer argues that we can distinguish ‘three ways of thinking about dirty hands, which derive in some very general fashion from neoclassical, Protestant, Catholic perspectives of politics and morality.’⁵²¹ For Walzer’s own purposes the accuracy of this categorization is not very important. What is important is the content of these roughly distinguished traditions. Briefly, the first tradition derives from a positive answer to the question posed above by Hollis: ‘Are there, then, officers of state who have a moral duty to do for us what we would be morally wrong to do for ourselves?’ The officers that would accept this ‘extra’ moral duty belong to the ‘Machiavellian’ tradition. The republican interpretation of Machiavelli’s works –usually affiliated with political realism as analyzed in the previous chapters– argues that the heroic Prince must exercise his duty to act for the good of his people in a world full of ‘wolves’ and ‘snares’. ‘So he cannot practise the virtues of a good citizen without betraying the interests of his subjects [...] The message is that there is dirty work to be done for the glory of the principedom and that a virtuous prince cannot discharge his duties without doing it. He should get his hands dirty and wear clean gloves.’⁵²²

This is the common view of the relationship between politics and morality nowadays. It is a view that argues about the necessity of compromising in order to disregard the paradoxes that derive from this relationship, but without ever revealing or explaining the compromise. This is why political realism is often met with doubt and suspicion. Ordinary people should accept that the politicians will have to act immorally in order to promote good and the only solution for the paradox seems to be a morality of appearances; that is, we all know that politicians will have to do dirty work on our

⁵¹⁹ De Wijze & Goodwin, ‘Bellamy on Dirty Hands’, 531.

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 531.

⁵²¹ Walzer, ‘Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands’, 174.

⁵²² Hollis, ‘Dirty Hands’, 389.

behalf but because we cannot accept the moral cost we need them, at least, to appear clean; thus, the 'dirty hands clean gloves' perspective.⁵²³

This first tradition is characterized, according to Walzer, by the fact that the Machiavellian hero has no inwardness. And for that he should be suspect; not because he tells political actors they must get their hands dirty, but because he does not specify the state of mind appropriate to a man with dirty hands. We know he is dirty, we know he attempts to appear clean, but 'What he thinks of himself we don't know.'⁵²⁴ The moral character of the political agent remains thus hidden, only to be judged by practical outcomes. This is obviously dangerous because it shows how easily political realism can degenerate into political *amoralism*. The second tradition Walzer examines takes an opposite view. It is one in which personal anguish sometimes seems the only acceptable excuse for political crimes. This is, according to him, the Weberian tradition as we examined it previously. In *Politics as a Vocation*, according to Walzer, Weber essentially argues that the good man with dirty hands is a hero still, but he is a tragic hero: 'With full consciousness of what he is doing, he does bad in order to do good, and surrenders his soul... His choices are hard and painful, and he pays the price not only while making them but forever after.' Walzer claims that the trouble with this view is that Weber attempts to resolve the problem of 'dirty hands' entirely within the confines of the individual conscience; but sometimes the hero's suffering needs to be socially expressed and sometimes socially limited.⁵²⁵

For Walzer, a politician with 'dirty hands' is an ethical concept that cannot be separated from the social norms of morality. The best way to assure this is a punishment for his or her immoral acts; a punishment according to the precepts of 'ordinary morality'. In that way, personal integrity or private ethical considerations are being connected with the social and both the perpetrator of the immoral action and the collective recipients of it acquire a better understanding of this action. When the politician pays the penalty his or her hands will be clean again, or as clean as human hands can ever be. Thus, the 'dirty hands' concept does not try to wash away the immorality of a contestable action under the guise of utilitarian calculation (as is the case in politics more often than not). Rather, 'it faces head on the paradoxical situation where politicians are sometimes required to do wrong in order to do right. And in so

⁵²³ For a defence of this view in contemporary liberal democracies see *ibid.*, Bellamy, 'Dirty Hands and Clean Gloves'.

⁵²⁴ Walzer, 'Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands', 176.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

doing, they become morally polluted and “tragic heroes”.⁵²⁶ The punishment is not to be decided according to the rules of politics itself; it must be the connective link between the ‘political order’ and the rest of the social spheres.

So the Catholic Church has always taught, and this teaching is central to the third tradition of political ethics according to Walzer. The thinker who can best represent this tradition is, for Walzer, Albert Camus and his political extremism as illustrated in his play *The Just Assassins*. Here we have the problem of ‘dirty hands’ in a new form. The heroes are innocent criminals, just assassins, because having killed, they are prepared to die –and will die: they are tragic figures because they faced a tragic dilemma. ‘Only their execution, by the same despotic authorities they are attacking, will complete the action in which they are engaged: dying, they need make no excuses. That is the end of their guilt and pain. The execution is not so much punishment as self-punishment and expiation. On the scaffold they wash their hands clean and, unlike the [Weberian] suffering servant, they die happy.’⁵²⁷ Walzer admits that he finds this third view more attractive than the other two and his inclination toward Camus’ perspective constitutes his famous argument about ‘dirty hands’. This argument derives from the tradition that requires from us at least to imagine a punishment or a penance that fits the crime of the politician and so to examine closely the nature of the crime. The other traditions, according to him, do not require that. Thus, ‘We would honour him [the politician] for the good he has done, and we would punish him for the bad he has done. We would punish him, that is, for the same reasons we punish anyone else’.⁵²⁸

Hollis offers a philosophically simpler, but no less tragic, explanation of the ‘dirty hands’ problem. There are, he says, two general views of politicians that also depict different traditions of political thought. First, he says, is the tradition that conceives the politician as the Machiavellian hero, a republican figure that must be ready to violate ‘ordinary morality’ in favour of the state. The most interesting view though, for Hollis, is the second opposite and more absolutist view of politicians which proposes that the political leaders should be ‘citizens squared’.⁵²⁹ By this account the statesman should bring only private virtues to public life:

Machiavelli’s view of virtue in princes cannot be extended to people at large, because a princely fox can operate only if people at large are not like him. But there is no such

⁵²⁶ De Wijze & Goodwin, ‘Bellamy on Dirty Hands’, 537.

⁵²⁷ Walzer, ‘Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands’, 178.

⁵²⁸ Ibid., 179.

⁵²⁹ Hollis, ‘Dirty Hands’, 389-390.

difficulty about supposing that everyone, prince and citizen alike, should live out the virtues of private life. The vision of a society governed by people whose integrity is that of private citizens and who shoulder the burdens of office as they would those of a home-maker is an attractive one. It has a simple and a subtle version. The simple one equates the integrity of the individual with unswerving obedience to conscience or to curt moral imperatives in all situations. If thou shalt not lie, then thou shalt not lie in office and thou shalt not order others to lie. This is the stuff of martyrs, and it has its obvious appeal... The subtler version has a more nuanced view of principle and of the nature of integrity in private life. It endorses [the view] against drawing sharp contrasts between an ethics of duty and an ethics of expediency. Integrity, therefore, is not a stark affair of flying the flag of principle, going down with the ship and damning the consequences... The citizen squared must treat the demands of office as a legitimate claim on his private integrity; yet, in doing so, he concedes nothing to Machiavelli.⁵³⁰

The simpler version of the citizen-squared view derives from an absolutist, monistic conception of morality and politics usually affiliated with Christian and deontic ethics. This conception can be easily criticized and rejected with respect to political action for all the reasons mentioned in the previous chapters, especially in the Weberian analysis: ‘The Christian does rightly and leaves the results with the Lord’—and conduct that follows the maxim of an ethic of responsibility, in which case one has to give an account of foreseeable results of one’s action... a man who believes in an ethic of responsibility takes account of precisely the average deficiencies of people.’⁵³¹ Therefore, as Hollis continues Weber’s argument, the integrity of the martyr is saved at his own expense, whereas the statesman’s refusal to compromise is paid for by his people. ‘The martyr goes to the stake himself and that we admire. But, let loose with political power, he sends others to the stake with an equal will and, in shutting his eyes to the moral nuances of political life without thereby abolishing them, he licenses very foul play, provided that it is conducted outside the limits of his simple moral lexicon.’⁵³²

The second and subtler version of the citizen-squared view is an attempt to mitigate the results of absolute attitudes in politics. The ‘citizen squared’ must treat the demands of office as a legitimate claim on his private integrity, and this might seem that will often result in Machiavellian advice. However, there is still a difference and for Hollis this difference shows itself when we ask *whose* integrity is at stake; namely, who will bear responsibility for the potentially morally dubious claims of office. The republican Machiavelli makes it that of the Prince, since there is no more final answer to

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 390-391.

⁵³¹ Weber, ‘Politics as a Vocation’, 77.

⁵³² Hollis, ‘Dirty Hands’, 390.

the questions ‘Who is the Prince?’ The ‘citizen squared’, by contrast, Hollis argues, is an individual first and a Prince (a politician or a public servant) afterwards. The identity of an individual does not change with office and we are all individuals. ‘On Machiavelli’s account, therefore, the Dirty Hands problem is ultimate, since the morality of princes has a different origin from the morality of citizens. On the citizen-squared view the units of moral accounting are always individuals, whatever special dilemmas face those individuals who hold office.’⁵³³ Here, it is made clear that the ‘dirty hands’ problem is the political expression of a moral dilemma based upon the tension between private and political morality, between the self and the public or political roles that the self must fulfil.

The problem of this subtler version of the ‘citizen-squared’ view, and accordingly the need to reject it, may be traced, according to Hollis, in the argument about the relation between private values and the demands of public or political roles. Here, the central paradox of politics in relation to morality derives from a conflict between the self and the role. The ‘citizen-squared’ view would have it that integrity is not a matter of identifying with one role or the other but of remaining true to one’s own self. This approach assumes that we can put moral constraints on individuals distinct from all normative constraints on holders of office. However, Hollis suggests, this misconstrues the relation of self to role, the nature of moral choice and hence the ‘dirty hands’ problem,⁵³⁴ and he gives three reasons for this: First, he says, the holding of office can change the basis of moral decision. The difference between private and public persons could be expressed by saying that private individuals acquire new moral duties with office.

Secondly, the attempt to place universal moral requirements on everyone, whether in office or not, fails to resolve the moral dilemmas of office. According to Hollis, such requirements are too broad and if general principles are treated as elastic, so that they can be massaged into specific shape for specific situations, then office becomes a specific situation. Thirdly, it is fallacious, Hollis claims, to argue that, where roles conflict, there must be a place to stand, which is prior to all roles, in order to umpire the conflict, exactly because there is no true human situation other than the web of social roles.⁵³⁵ Thus, Hollis essentially rejects the ‘citizen-squared’ view based on a theory of value pluralism. Because of that pluralism we cannot assign priority to either

⁵³³ Ibid., 391.

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 392.

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 393.

the self (personal standpoint) or the role (impersonal standpoint). Attempting to find universal reasons in order to assign this priority is doomed to fail as an absolutist, and thus inappropriate approach to politics.

Hence, schematically, Hollis' and Walzer's general question has been whether there are two sources of morality, one grounding the duties of persons in office, the other those of private individuals which could also be called 'ordinary' morality as it was explained in the preceding chapters. However, it might be more appropriate to talk about two different systems within one pluralist moral world. In both their arguments the 'dirty hands' concept has been used in order to enter the philosophical debate about the discontinuity between the private and public or political morality. Walzer's conclusion is that political action is so morally uncertain that politicians necessarily take moral as well as political risks, committing crimes that they only think ought to be committed. In other words, politicians under the morally peculiar demands of politics are hard pressed to act in ways that they know they might be morally dubious. 'They override rules without ever being certain that they have found the best way to the results they hope to achieve, and we don't want them to do that too quickly or too often. So it is important that the moral stakes be very high –which is to say, that the rules be rightly valued.'⁵³⁶ That, Walzer argues, is the reason for Camus' political extremism: because without his executioner there is no one to set the stakes or maintain the values except ourselves, and also, there is probably no way to do either except through philosophic reiteration and political activity. For Walzer, the politician lies, manipulates, and kills, and we must make sure he pays the price.⁵³⁷ This must be done in order to make certain that morality and politics must check each other.

The 'citizen-squared view', as explained and rejected by Hollis, suggests that there cannot be two sources of morality, but only the universal duties of individuals. This is essentially how moral absolutism conceives of politics. In a refined form, this view allows that the demands of office do make a difference, or in other words that the apparent tension between private and public moral considerations is taken into account. Hollis understands the unrealistic nature of the 'citizen-squared' view because he cannot see how the self can offer overriding moral reasons against the political role it is supposed to fulfil. Thus, for him, even a limited abstraction from social roles to pre-social moral individuals cannot be acceptable. Although Hollis does not specifically

⁵³⁶ Walzer, 'Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands', 179-180.

⁵³⁷ Ibid., 180.

develop his account in terms of value pluralism, his argument can be clearly explicated based on the irreducible variety of 'value orders'.

However, Hollis admits that 'I may have made the Princely view sound as if a Prince were necessarily a social actor, whereas his subjects were individuals. In that case it would be plausible to suggest that there are two moralities, one social and the other individual. But there is no need to put it like that. The Prince's subjects are not individuals but citizens; and the difference in the moral demands of public and private life attaches to different social positions'. In final analysis, 'Moral questions are about how we should live out social relations with others and, I submit, answers involve nothing more private than a citizen.'⁵³⁸ Even though Hollis is explicitly saying that there are two sources of morality, he concludes that private morality is irrelevant in constituting, motivating and controlling political life: 'the art of the morally permissible in an arena where there is no one more private than a citizen'.⁵³⁹ In the end, he says, he cannot find a better solution to the paradox of 'dirty hands' than a compromise of letting our agents act beyond our control.⁵⁴⁰ Nevertheless, this approach renders the relationship between politics and morality problematic, because when private morality is to be firmly separated from public and political morality we end up with political *amoralist* attitudes. The solution should be to conceive moral integrity as the outcome in part of our engagement into social roles and in part of our ability critically to evaluate the morality of those roles according to our private ethical commitments, not to reject the significance of morality in political conduct altogether.

Hollis' conclusion about the 'citizen-squared' view is that it differs from the Machiavellian in bidding the man in office do what he would do, were he not in office. According to him, this demand is incoherent, since the problem would not exist for him, were he not in office.⁵⁴¹ Political roles are created in the first place in order to be different. We have seen in the preceding chapter the example that intends to corroborate his claim: if I were a fireman sent to put out a fire in the school, then I should treat my children exactly like all others, because it is morally corrupt to use the powers of office to further personal relationships. And from this logically follows that the attempt to place universal moral requirements on everyone, whether in office or not, fails to resolve the moral dilemmas of office; and that, secondly, it is fallacious to argue that, where roles conflict, there must be a place to stand, which is prior to all roles, in

⁵³⁸ Hollis, 'Dirty Hands', 394-395.

⁵³⁹ Ibid., 396.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 398.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 394.

order to umpire the conflict, exactly because there is no true human situation other than the web of social roles.⁵⁴² In other words, morality is basically constituted by moral specificities as these are defined by different social roles. Value pluralism reflects this variety of roles. Therefore, this variety is unavoidable and moral conflicts are also unavoidable, unless we conceive the different moral spheres of our lives as totally unrelated with each other, or attempt, like Plato, to eradicate variety altogether.

D) Politics and morality: The normative importance of the ‘dirty hands’ concept

The argument from the value pluralism perspective is that in our lives there will always be situations where moral agents would be unable to assign priority and to decide the right way to act. ‘Dirty hands’ is not an exclusively political phenomenon, but it is an appropriate explanation of the fact that the different structure of politics demands a different understanding and application of ‘ordinary’ moral values. The difference derives from the strong claims of impartiality and utility in the public and political ‘orders’ respectively. How we would decide about this application depends on our understanding –habitual and critical– of the relationship between the personal and the impersonal standpoint. It should not be determined merely by the significance that social or political roles have in themselves, because these are also externally determined.

Nagel’s conclusion that public morality, that is, the impersonal imposition of rules, has a special character exactly because of its scale, its lack of individuality and its institutional structure, does not mean that it should be considered unrelated to private morality. Thus when public officials accept special obligations in serving interests that their office is designed to advance, they correlatively reduce their right to consider other factors. These factors include their personal interests in a sense that they are not related to the institution or their role in it.⁵⁴³ If public and political morality is, in final analysis, related with ‘ordinary’ morality, the basic moral constraints we should pose on public and political action derive partly from ‘ordinary’ moral values. It does not matter how these values have been constituted in the first place, i.e. with priority given either to our impersonal or personal standpoint. The important thing is that the utilitarian and impartial reasoning of the public and political ‘order’ is kept under check. Hence the

⁵⁴² Ibid., 393.

⁵⁴³ Nagel, ‘Ruthlessness in Public Life’, 89.

expression 'dirty hands' when these limits have been violated, even if this violation was necessary in order to promote some other moral end.

Thus, some of the above philosophical approaches are similar in recognizing that private and political principles belong to different –and sometimes conflicting– types of values. This does not mean that they are not interrelated. Therefore, we must apply additional constraints –as derived from 'ordinary' morality– on public and political action. It has been acknowledged that public life may have a special character and weight due to the special features of public and political roles (acting for others, ruling over others, using violence against them etc.), but they propose that private morality should not be completely separated from political considerations. Then again, it is in Walzer's account that we see why the conflict of moral values is unavoidable and how we should face this inevitability: 'We would punish [the politician], that is, for the same reasons we punish anyone else.' Understanding the nature of moral character in relation to the political decisions that must be made offers the solution to political judgment: 'it is by his hands that we know him. If he were a moral man and nothing else, his hands would not be dirty; if he were a politician and nothing else, he would pretend that they were clean.'⁵⁴⁴

The pluralistic argument of 'dirty hands' should be posed against the 'dirty hands clean gloves' concept, according to which we all know that politicians act or should act immorally, but as long as they are able to hide this we should be satisfied. It is the logic of value pluralism that takes for granted, at least for a democratic society, that individuals as citizens share, and they should share, the moral burdens of the political deeds done by their politicians. This is their unavoidable role as members of a political community. This logic requires that there will be posed some limits to the 'end justifies the means'. In final analysis, since private morality is strongly interrelated to political morality it should pose some constraints upon public or political action. Of course, public officials accept special obligations that come with their assigned positions and in doing so they correlatively reduce their right to consider other factors, not related to the institution or their role in it: this is the special character of public and political obligations.⁵⁴⁵ However, it is still a special character, not an autonomous one, and the basic moral constraints that set the limits and control political action and/or the abuse of public and political resources derive from this interrelation and this tension indeed. The abuse and misuse of power and the corrupted use of collective resources is

⁵⁴⁴ Walzer, 'Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands', 168.

⁵⁴⁵ Nagel, 'Ruthlessness in Public Life', 89.

a private moral behaviour and it should be criticized like one. Thus the public and political wrong should be in principle conceived as a criminal act.⁵⁴⁶

The approach suggested here is not only philosophically against the ‘dirty hands clean gloves’ compromise, but also, and maybe more importantly, politically. The problem with the ‘dirty hands clean gloves’ argument is that politicians and public officials would (too) often use it in order to abuse the power that comes with the special character of their public role. This is the Platonic argument against power for power’s sake as illustrated in the *Myth of Gyges*. For Plato, reluctance to hold political power was the last safety valve against political *amoralism*. Similarly, the ‘dirty hands’ argument, as constructed so far in relation to insoluble and tragic dilemmas, compels us to assign the appropriate importance towards feeling the moral cost of a moral violation for moral reasons. This is because, essentially, the significance of reluctance depends on the recognition of the tragic nature of human condition and of the tragic remorse of the agents involved in dubious moral activities.⁵⁴⁷ Therefore, the concept of reluctance which can be traced back in the classical debate between politics and morality is in close relationship with the concept of the ‘moral remainder’. The virtuous agent is indeed virtuous because he is reluctant to act in front of the moral and possible tragic dilemmas he might face, and also because when he does act he is burdened with the ‘moral remainder’ of his resolute action.⁵⁴⁸

Peter Digeser argues that Walzer’s solution to the problem may not be ultimately desirable because there can be no punishment for tragic choices, since this may render other actors less willing to make such difficult choices.⁵⁴⁹ However, having politicians entering politics because they know there will be no ‘ordinary’ moral constraints and criminal punishment for immoral acts, is certainly an even worse scenario. Besides, Digeser agrees that this alternative, which is concentrated in Weber’s proposition that the ethic of responsibility for politicians should have a corresponding ethic of responsibility for citizens, is not desirable as well. This view pronounces the empathy of citizens and their understanding of the perplexing moral claims of the political world: citizens should understand the predicament of their politicians and

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 90.

⁵⁴⁷ De Wijze, ‘Tragic Remorse’, 469-470.

⁵⁴⁸ Like briefly noted at a previous stage, in monistic explanations of morality, either coming from deontic and utilitarian arguments or from arguments that suggest the unity of virtues (for example Plato’s *Republic*), the moral or virtuous agent becomes a paradox. When there are no moral conflicts or tragic dilemmas, moral agency becomes a redundant concept because the significance of a virtuous judgment is significantly diminished. Also see Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 73.

⁵⁴⁹ Peter Digeser, ‘Forgiveness, and Politics: Dirty Hands and Imperfect Procedures’, *Political Theory*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (October 1998), 711.

forget, but not forgive, their moral misdeeds. But, Digeser says, ‘The danger of citizens adopting an ethic of responsibility is that it is all too easy for politicians to portray the normal as extraordinary and claim that it is necessary to do evil in situations in which it is not true.’⁵⁵⁰

In the case of ‘dirty hands’ the appeals to necessity generated by this problem are extraordinarily dangerous and have been frequently misused: ‘In light of the difficulties for citizens to discern whether a problem of dirty hands has actually arisen, and given the propensity of politicians to deploy this excuse, forgetting the remainder simply lets government evade responsibility... Politicians may have to dirty their hands, but they should not expect political amnesia or forgiveness. Wrongs that issue from appeals to necessity should be politically unforgivable and not forgotten.’⁵⁵¹ If the ethic of responsibility is too passive for citizens and entails the danger of the misuse of power, Digeser argues, citizens should adopt an angle of repose or vigilance, an antagonistic resignation toward their government. According to this view, doing evil to do good should diminish the reservoir of support for a regime and its leaders. ‘It should cost enough so that politicians are careful with its use. However, it should not be so costly (which may be the case if punishment were called for) that politicians refuse to act in face of tragic choices.’ This angle of repose should not be transformed into cynicism from citizens’ part because in a state with cynical citizenry the danger of general social corruption is unavoidable.⁵⁵² In a strikingly opportune argument Bosanquet wrote, almost a century ago, that ‘The means adopted by [a] supreme power to discharge its responsibilities as a whole, are of course subject to criticism as respects of the conception of good which they imply and their appropriateness to the task of realising it. But’, Bosanquet continues, ‘it is mere confusion to apply to them names borrowed from analogous acts of individuals within communities, to impute them, as it were, to individuals under dyslogistic predicates and to pass moral judgment upon them in the same sense as on private acts.’⁵⁵³

In conclusion, the philosophical re-evaluation of the ‘dirty hands’ concept should offer or add something to our understanding regarding political decision-making and political judgment. De Wijze and Goodwin argue that a proper ‘dirty hands’ analysis improves on the standard analyses by adding at least four separate but interrelated levels of assessment to situations of unavoidable moral conflict. First, it

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 711.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., 713.

⁵⁵² Ibid., 714.

⁵⁵³ Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory*, 326-327.

does that by stressing that, in situations where different but equally strong sets' of values conflict, there is no morally cost-free course of action. Second, a 'dirty hands' analysis warns against forcing an exclusively deontological or consequentialist, or any other moral template, on cases of intractable moral conflict. Third, a 'dirty hands' analysis influences judgment concerning how we ought to act by providing a further layer of considerations beyond the usual concerns of moral and pragmatic considerations. Fourth, it enables the correct characterization of the moral phenomenology of getting 'dirty hands', that is, how we ought to *feel* about the necessary dirty actions undertaken. 'All in all, a [dirty hands] analysis better captures our moral reality in the face of intractable moral conflicts[.]'⁵⁵⁴

Therefore, the solution to the problem of 'dirty hands' is political activity and strict moral judgment from the citizens' part in combination with the endorsement of the necessity of moral character in politics. The philosophical key for such an approach is to reject the dominant view of contemporary moral theories which try to avoid the paradox of politics and morality altogether. A theory of value pluralism, as expressed in the accounts of Walzer, Hollis, Williams, Nagel, Coady and Mendus, is the starting point for such an approach because it helps us 'appreciate the complexities of a moral politics so that we can properly judge politicians and so they can appropriately judge themselves.'⁵⁵⁵ In addition to this approach, however, we should use the concept of 'dirty hands' as a normative account against moral naivety because, as we aimed to show in the course of this thesis, some moral conflicts are unavoidable, as their consequences are tragic.

⁵⁵⁴ De Wijze & Goodwin, 'Bellamy on Dirty Hands', 537-538.

⁵⁵⁵ De Wijze, 'The Challenge of a Moral Politics', 199.

Conclusion

As it has been exposed through the various historical explorations and analytical arguments in this thesis, the inner connection between politics and morality is always at the centre of attention when classical questions about the meaning and purpose of human life are asked. Thus, I hope to have shown that amidst the ever-changing conditions of social life the need to insist on a better understanding of this connection has not diminished. Thus, the explicit aim of this thesis has been a contribution to the discussion regarding the way political action is morally judged according to its internal moral standards and/or to external more 'ordinary' standards. The purpose has been to make this distinction understandable and show how 'ordinary' or external, on the one hand, and specialised or internal to politics moral standards, on the other, are in tension but also interrelated. The central conclusion of my argument has been that the continuous need for this kind of clarification is the result of the ongoing process of moral fragmentation in the modern world. The more morality appears to be losing its coherent nature, the more politics becomes a disputed, but at the same time morally necessary, field of activity.

Politics is an activity that derives from moral considerations and, at the same time, an activity that raises moral considerations by itself. Thus, when we aim at a conception of moral politics it is not always sufficient to state the obvious, i.e. there are apparent contradictions, which cannot be resolved unless we are ready to make sacrifices or offer a more systematic moral guidance. From the outset of this argument I have tried to make clear that the aim should be more humble, yet more complex. That is, the aim should be a better understanding of our continuously changing moral universe in relation to political action and its moral justification. Better understanding is not of course something radically original in itself, but it is necessary as an indispensable element for the improvement of the 'human condition' in its classical and Weberian meaning. I hope to have shown, therefore, the methodological usefulness in re-approaching politics and morality through the spectacles of thinkers whose attempts to offer answers to our problem produced powerful political philosophies. As Pitkin rightly argues, '[u]ntil we can answer such [problems], we are not ready to criticize or

reject, because we do not yet know what is being proposed. Understanding must take precedence over criticism.⁵⁵⁶

Hence, what we have learnt from this philosophical retrospective is that, although politics seems to be in perpetual tension with morality, politics can rarely be considered as an *amoral* field of practical conduct. In contemporary political philosophy there has also been some serious attention directed to problems which are related to social organization and ethical objectives. Political morality is therefore a recurrent theme, since its complexity and its ambiguities are very intriguing. This is because they make us realize the incompleteness of our political and ethical thought. Thus, in attempting to explicate why politics seems an indispensable feature of morality, despite the challenges that it continually poses to it, it is possible to approach the subject from three different but related perspectives. First, from the perspective of historical reconstructions of major philosophical works, which focus on the tension between politics and morality. Second from the perspective of philosophical arguments, which focus on the discussion about the nature of morality in relation to practical choices. And finally from a political perspective, which focuses on the practical consequences of the tension between politics and morality and on the special moral character of politics itself. However, only rarely do we find accounts that explain the relationship between politics and morality within a comprehensive account that combines these three approaches. My aspiration has been, therefore, to introduce the possibility and usefulness for such an account, which would begin from an understanding of the problem itself through its history; continue with a philosophical analysis of all the variables that constitute the problem in the present circumstances; and conclude with the practical claim that we should rely on politics as the only viable solution to the problem of morality. In other words, I wish to suggest that politics is not the problem for moral action, but the solution of moral action.

Hampshire argues that 'Plato and Aristotle were surely right to think that virtues and vices in government, and in the uses of power, always constitute the greater part of morality, or at least one half of morality, when we come to reflect on our life and times'⁵⁵⁷ This is the starting point and the general argument that underlies this thesis and explains the need for the historical reconstruction. Plato sets the background and terminology of the problem: the fundamental distinction between the moral code of private action and the moral code of political action. He argues that the solution to this

⁵⁵⁶ Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice*, 314.

⁵⁵⁷ Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 12.

problem requires a holistic approach which does not separate political theory from a theory of knowledge and ethical theory. The holistic and permanent solution is indicative of Plato's desperation about the most important philosophical problem: the relation between morality, politics and being. He essentially asks 'how can humans live a happy (virtuous) life, without having first resolved the difficulties in organising their collective existence?' His answer is that this organisation must first and foremost aim at preserving one's moral self-integrity, and this can only be achieved if we stop posing contradictory demands to it. This is, at the end of the day, what we are struggling with even nowadays; the fundamental philosophical problem that underpins, without exception, all political philosophies.

Resolving this problem without having recourse to metaphysical accounts of morality was Aristotle's response to Plato. For Aristotle, the problem is a practical-one because morality is about practical choices; it is about what one ought to do given some set of known and unknown factors or conditions. Thus, from the classical beginnings of the debate there is a variety of political dimensions in pondering about morality, considering that practical choices within the sphere of politics seem to bear the greatest moral importance for our collective existence. Therefore, Aristotle's political philosophy is particularly significant in the historical reconstruction of the problem because, as argued previously, his analysis of theoretical and practical reason and the transition from the former to the latter constitutes the basis for every succeeding philosophical account regarding the relationship between politics and morality. The Aristotelian tradition (often identified with classical republicanism) is still very strong nowadays exactly because it develops a complete and realistic frame within which we can reconcile our naturally political aims with a universally accepted conception of the good life.

It is not by luck, therefore, that the structure of this thesis resembles one of the central parts of Aristotle's political and ethical philosophy: the transition from the philosophical understanding of the problem of politics and moral pluralism to the claim that politics has been, and still remains, the most important practical activity is like the transition from Aristotle's contemplation to practical thinking. While making this transition one has to think, necessarily, whether it is political activity or moral theory that must take priority in ordering ethical practices and, consequently, which one develops first. In the same manner Aristotle struggled with the prioritization between intellectual and moral virtue. Thus, in reconstructing the problem through the modern perspective, one is surely about to recognize Aristotle's insoluble puzzle of political

pluralism (as derived from the variety of instantiations of practical reason) and ethical objectivism (as derived from the completeness and self-sufficiency of theory). For Aristotle and all succeeding philosophers this puzzle poses an existential problem that concerns and will concern all of us for the foreseeable future.

Of course, it is Machiavelli who re-introduces the problem in modernity after a long period of reliance on the Christian *apolitical* conception of the good and the precepts of salvation (eternal happiness) in another world. However, we must go through a variety of interpretations of Machiavelli's works in order to show that he does not merely reinstate the problem but he expands it into horizons that were not conceivable before. Thus, I hope to have made clear that irrespective of Machiavelli's true intentions, his works forced to the surface a historical lesson that we must take into consideration when examining the nature of morality and its relation to politics. Hampshire articulates this lesson succinctly when he argues that, '[w]e will perplex ourselves unnecessarily if we assume that all human beings have willy-nilly been entered as competitors in a single moral steeplechase, and that we need criteria for allotting them points on their performance',⁵⁵⁸ because 'the problem that Machiavelli posed in unphilosophical terms, and in terms appropriate to his time, is the specification of a more general issue in moral philosophy, and, further, that this general issue, philosophical though it is, often does cause confusion, and does in fact lead to despair in day-to-day politics. The general issue is the incompatibility of different conceptions of the good life which are attached to different social roles and to the individual natures of very different human beings.'⁵⁵⁹ With Machiavelli therefore, we can for the first time reconstruct the problem of moral integrity, the plurality of social roles and the plurality of conceptions of the good by using our own vocabulary (deontology vs. utilitarianism; the ends and the means; Christianity and politics; republicanism and universalism etc.). In this sense, this is a crucial chapter in understanding the problem itself and its history. This is because it poses the problem in a manner that could not have been accessible to the ancient classical authors. That is, politics and morality are not in tension just because there is a discontinuity between private and political virtue, but also, and maybe more significantly, because politics can only realize one conception of the good at any given time. Hence, political roles represent specific conceptions of the good, when in the human moral universe there is an incompatible variety of such conceptions.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., 168.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 13.

Thus, last but not least, it is Weber who decidedly pronounces the problem as permanently present and insoluble, considering the analytical tools at our disposal. This is where the essential argument of moral pluralism in relation to politics and morality is finally revealed. With Weber we can clearly see the origins of the differentiation between the ancients and the more modern political philosophers in relation to the roots of value pluralism. If for the ancients the main distinction or conflict was between private and political virtue, in contemporary times there is also the element of public impartiality as a result of the dichotomy between the nation and the state. This is an essential feature of moral pluralism which explains the intensification of the complexity of the connection between politics and morality in modernity. But Weber is a key figure in this reconstruction also because he claims that despite the fact that the insoluble conflict between morality and politics is part of the irreducible moral pluralism, politics should remain *the* predominant moral activity. Virtue within an endless variety of ‘conditions of existence’ remains the ultimate aim of moral and political philosophy, notwithstanding the fact that we now know that a universal and unitary account of virtues is maybe impossible. Politics has a particular characteristic which assigns to it a universal dimension, exactly because it sets the frame within which we pursue this aim. The question of whether this frame is based on an arbitrary conception of the good is irrelevant insofar as the resultant form of social organization is morally meaningful and allows a fulfilling ethical self-evaluation of its members.

In the classical accounts, the relationship between politics and morality is problematic because of the basic dichotomy between the *polis* and the individual. The focus of this classical division changes when we move to modernity. Now, in place of the *polis* we find two quite distinct concepts that constitute political society; the nation and the state. The moral significance of the community for its members becomes something obscure and complicated, maybe lost amidst the variety of moral claims coming from different spheres of social life. Hence, it has become obvious from the Weberian conclusion of the historical reconstruction that the two features which signify the transition from antiquity to modernity are the fragmentation of morality and, as part of this fragmentation, the distinction between the public and the political, in addition to the distinction between the private and the political.

The acceptance of moral pluralism, as the penultimate obstacle for the unity to which politics aspires, signifies the end of the genealogy of the problem and the –final– transition to our contemporary understanding of the inner connection between politics and morality. Thus, it has been the contention of this thesis that the concept of moral

dilemmas is an essential feature for the philosophical understanding of our problem. It is the necessary tool for analysing the debate between monistic and pluralistic theories of moral and political conduct. Their basic difference lies in their acceptance or rejection of the existence of moral dilemmas and conflicts. As a consequence of this difference, we also have different conceptions of moral and political agency. The ambition of the dominant monistic moral theories of modernity is that of a faultless moral theory (i.e. wherein no moral conflicts are really possible) which would necessarily entail faultless political action. On the other hand, according to pluralistic explanations of morality, if there are moral conflicts, then we should have to grapple with Weber's existential problem, although now posed in a slightly different manner: that is, we should understand whether moral dilemmas arising in the political arena are any different from more ordinary moral dilemmas that may arise in everyday life, that is, outside politics; and then in what sense they are different. In a few words, this is how we eventually arrive at one of the definitive questions of political morality. The question is whether moral pluralism should entail disordered political action.

This question is also related to the distinction between moral pluralism and moral relativism, because pluralistic understandings of morality do not deny the existence of fundamental and maybe universal moral principles; they merely accept the possibility that these principles may be conflicting and irreconcilable. On the other hand, in moral relativism, where 'anything goes' in terms of moral reasoning, disordered political action may be more possible or even inevitable; and as Plato was the first to argue, in such cases moral reasoning necessarily degenerates into power relations. But throughout the centuries, we have been assigning to politics, a special moral importance precisely because human beings envisage collective existence as something more meaningful than merely a web of power relations. If, because of the fragmentation of morality, we denied the possibility of a moral politics in the first place, there would be no need to call some political situations 'dirty'. The explanation of 'dirty hands' as the political expression of insoluble moral conflicts has reinforced the claim of this thesis that politics cannot but be moral, even in a world of conflicting moral values. In contrast, if we understood politics as the power struggle that necessarily follows a relativistic account of morality, then to call politics a 'dirty' business would be redundant and pointless.

What we learn from the historical explorations about the problem of politics and morality is that despite the acceptance that moral unity is not possible, we still find refuge to politics as the only way to resolving existential problems related to our moral

purposes. Nowadays, we take it for granted that politics requires a plurality of moral viewpoints from which to begin; ‘and the interaction of these varied perspectives, their reconciliation into a single public policy, though that reconciliation will always be temporary, partial and provisional.’⁵⁶⁰ Thus, despite our newly founded certainty that there may not be a universally accepted coherent account of morality for political societies, we still ponder about politics in the classical ‘existential’ sense. In other words, in contemporary political philosophy we still attribute a special moral character to politics, although we have outdated its ancient perfectionist and teleological conceptions. A moral relativist could not agree, by principle, with this classical or ‘existential’ approach to our problem, because for him, if all moral meaning is relative, and thus pointless, then moral politics is also meaningless and pointless.

So, if we are ready to analyze the relation between politics and moral pluralism and, as I have attempted to show, accept that politics is part of the conflicting moral values and part of the solution to this conflict, we need to ask the question ‘in what way is this so?’ In one of the central passages of this thesis I hope to have demonstrated how the moral code of politics is, on the one hand, part of moral fragmentation and, on the other, an essential factor for its reconciliation. Several points, which perhaps are not fully developed by some of the literature, have been discussed here, especially the conflict between the private, the public and the political spheres of action. Private ethical considerations are based on a variety of moral values, whereas impartiality is the dominant value of the public sphere, and utility is the guiding principle of politics. Different spheres of individual and social activity are permeated by different sets of moral values, which are of equal importance for the agents involved and irreducible to each other. That is how moral pluralism is depicted within the universe of social organization and action, and this is why the connection between politics and morality sometimes seems like a puzzling subject for philosophers who pursue morally unifying answers.

Of course, the correlation of the private sphere of action with principles of the ‘agent-centred’ standpoint and of the public and political spheres with principles of the ‘outcome-centred’ standpoint repositions us within the ancient dichotomy between private and political virtue, which was then substituted in modernity by the conflict between principle and utility. I have claimed, however, that although this fundamental dichotomy is the starting and definitive point for the relationship between politics and morality, we need to conceive the importance of moral agency in the social through the

⁵⁶⁰ Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice*, 217.

tension between the three types of moral values as analyzed above. Only then shall we understand the intricacies of the problematic relationship and be able to see what politics is and can be for morality and vice versa.

The analysis of the inner connection between politics and morality is exposed therefore in this complexity of the variety of types of moral values that are in interplay. Monistic explanations of morality simplify this complexity and in practice exacerbate the confusion regarding our problem. The modern threefold categorization of moral spheres signifies a progressive fragmentation of moral values that redefines the relationship between politics and morality in the course of time. I have argued that this categorization is an essential feature for a better philosophical understanding of politics and morality within the pluralist tradition. Moral fragmentation is depicted in the conflict between private moral integrity, which is constituted by general personal ethical considerations; political virtue, or sometimes called the political ethic, which gives priority to the utility and consequences of political action; and public morality which is particularly related to the public official's virtues of impartiality. Thus, fulfilling private, public and political roles requires a difficult prioritization of the demands of the role against the requirements of private ethical considerations. Once again, we return to the problem that Plato first posed: how is moral integrity possible, if the ethical requirements of social (public and political) roles are not compatible with the demands of private virtue? And then, what should one do in order to resolve this problem? Should one change the structure of the social roles so that they will conform to private ethical considerations (like Plato suggested)? Or should one claim that private ethical considerations are the outcome of the function of social roles and thus the latter have priority?

What we examined as the derivability problem in this thesis, is essentially a reconstruction of this perennial issue of how to assign priority between the two basic moral standpoints that define our daily moral life. The pluralistic argument has been that if one accepts the existence of moral conflicts and thus, in consequence, the pluralistic nature of morality, the two standpoints are irreducible to each other and it is impossible to assign priority to either of them. They represent the dualist manner in which human beings conceive the moral world: the 'agent-centred' against the 'outcome-centred' standpoints. The morality of social roles is a projection of the 'outcome-centred' standpoint, whereas private ethical considerations are a projection of the 'agent-centred' standpoint. The conflict within the self is projected into the conflict between the self and the social roles (public and political) that the self must fulfil.

Hence, when considering the general issue of this thesis, that is, the inner connection between politics and morality, we see that private or personal ethical considerations are related to moral values which mainly derive from the 'agent-centred' standpoint, whereas public and political morality is mainly constituted upon the values which derive from the 'outcome-centred' standpoint. We say mainly, because there is always some degree of overlapping between values and principles deriving from the three different sets of moral values. Thus, one of the main contributions of this thesis has been the clarification of these distinctions and the analysis of political morality through an understanding of how and when there is an overlapping of the otherwise conflicting moral codes.

My claim is that the root of the philosophical confusion lies exactly within this fundamental dichotomy between the two standpoints, which is further exacerbated in politics because of the further distinction between the public and the political. However, I hope to have successfully argued, we should not simply accept the distinctions and the conflicting nature of the moral codes that are in interplay. Instead, my argument is in favour of the view that personal (private ethical commitments) are indispensable for the function of public and political morality. Therefore, it can be understood how the agents, individually and collectively, morally evaluate this interplay and set the boundaries between the different spheres of moral activity.

Finally, the last point of this thesis to the political aspect of the complex philosophical problem of politics and morality is related to the practical consequences of such a conception of their inner connection as described above. Because the purpose of any inquiry of this kind, as Aristotle posed it since the beginning, is to find out what ought to be done; what the moral agents ought to do. If we conceive moral integrity as the outcome in part of our engagement into social (public and political) roles and in part of our ability critically to evaluate the morality of those roles according to our private ethical commitments, then the practical question is 'how do we set constraints on political and public action within a pluralistic approach?' Of course, it has been argued throughout the thesis, political and public roles inevitably carry with them certain duties to be fulfilled, and these roles have some special character because of the special character of politics in moulding the moral purposes of the collectivity. Therefore, the conflicting nature of moral values in different spheres of life requires political agents who have a certain ability to reconcile, with the least possible moral cost, the conflicting values. Essentially, then, what we call political and public virtue is the ability of the agents who act within those spheres to comprehend the special moral importance of

politics in a morally fragmented world. Once again, Aristotle's ethics should be here our guide: practical wisdom is the ultimate virtue because it relies on the philosophical understanding of the complexity of morality, before proceeding to commanding practical choices. Nowadays, we need to re-introduce this conception of political virtue against the conception of political virtue purely as successful calculation.

The case of 'dirty hands' has been used as an example to reveal the practical consequences of moral fragmentation for the political agents who, more often than not, face insoluble moral dilemmas. My argument, however, has been that in reality, if one accepts the analysis from the philosophical perspective of this thesis, 'dirty hands' may not express fully the complexity of the relationship between politics and morality and the predicament of the political agents involved in such cases. A politically active moral agent must learn how to recognize the special responsibility of carrying the burden of making political decisions, and he must be able to discern and be prepared for those inevitable situations that will require resolution of insoluble conflicts. Therefore, I hope to have successfully shown that the main foci for the philosophical treatment of the problem of political morality should be: first the central theme of moral fragmentation; and second the conception of politics as part of this fragmentation and at the same time as the only practical activity that may help reconcile the opposing moral values and the conflicting conceptions of the good. Politics may constitute its own autonomous moral code amongst many others, but in the end politics is the only practical activity that cannot be separated from the other spheres of human action. Only through politics do societies find the unity of moral purpose that they constantly seek, even if only temporarily and partially. This existential need to achieve some sense of moral unity through politics is the connecting thread of the genealogy from Plato to Weber, despite the break of modernity from ancient conceptions of the good life. The philosophical understanding of the problem is a precondition for political virtue, in the Aristotelian sense.

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